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shuffle

by

Brittni Ann Carey

A Creative Writing Project

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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shuffle

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April 24, 2015

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## Abstract

*shuffle* is a multi-genre novel that troubles the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present, and traditional heteronormative gender roles. The novel tracks the growth of Alexandra from an observer to an active participant in the construction of her identity. By considering the many contributing factors to identity-building, such as past experience, physical embodiment, and social expectation, *shuffle* highlights the importance of relationships and the fluidity of memory. *shuffle* also considers the relationship between human subjects and technology, demonstrating how technology participates in the interactive process of identity-building.

## **Dedication**

For Chelsea.

Who we have been isn't who we are  
and who we are isn't who we have to be.  
But whoever we are now, have been, will become,  
I love you.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# shuffle

Brittni Ann Carey

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*"People are evaluating that past in ways that we might find frivolous and wrongheaded, and they are using it for their own purposes. Which happens all the time... how DO we understand the past? What ARE its uses? Do we ever learn from it, or do we learn enough, or do we sometimes learn the wrong things?"*

~ 2014 Reddit Ask Me Anything Interview, Margaret Atwood

*"A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction...The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."*

~ "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway

*"Those indie bands all got their own synths and beat machines, and began reflecting the diverse tastes of the iTunes generation with greater freedom. Genres became blurrier and harder to distinguish from each other, while dozens of new subgenres sprang up overnight..."*

~ "How 21st Century Tech Advances Have Affected Music," Al Shipley

[select *Playlist.*]

ttttchhhhkkkkk

tchhk

tcccchhh

tcchhhh

tchk

tkk

[...]

[...]

[*Shuffle.*]

## 20. HIPSTER CENTRAL

FADE IN:

EXT. STREET - DAY, EARLY SEPTEMBER

ALEXANDRA walks through a residential area. She is dressed in a loose sweater, vintage skirt, and leggings. She wears black square-framed glasses.

She crosses from the park to a shop-lined street.

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

You could call this the fringe of Hipster Central. Expect bicycles, indie rock strains, and slim university boys in tight jeans and ankle boots discussing Socialism as they wait for the bus. The street is totally packed with secondhand shops, vegan bistros, and hole-in-the-wall bookstores, with the inevitable draw of food chains every so often; but people generally come for the unique flavours. If you want Starbucks, you can go downtown, or south about three blocks. We like to think we're better than that commercial bullshit, but having it around, well, it's a comfort thing. Something to compare ourselves to. Something we can say we're not.

INT. COFFEESHOP -CONTINUOUS

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

The Cure cafe's a hotspot around here. They specialize in chai tea lattes topped with coarsely ground spices, cold-sweat bottles of beer, and samosas. Here, in the back hall leading to the bathroom and the kitchen, slogans scrawl over the walls in pencil and sharpie and the people behind the till are in on it. You can write whatever you want.

*Bon Iver* sings from ceiling mounted speakers. "Perth."

Alexandra approaches the counter. Reads from *The Brothers Karamazov* as she waits in line.

JAY is working the till.

The couple in front of Alexandra shuffles to the side and she moves forward.

ALEXANDRA

*(holding her place in the book with her thumb)*

Could I have a chai, please? To stay.

JAY

*(tucks the end of his bangs behind his ear)*

Um, is that a regular or large?

ALEXANDRA

Regular's fine.

JAY

Anything else? Something sweet to balance out that  
tome you got there?

Alexandra laughs.

ALEXANDRA

No, just the chai, thanks man.

*(hands him a five dollar bill)*

Busy today?

JAY

*(smiles into the cash drawer)*

Oh, yeah, university classes switch over at 10, it's  
our morning rush.

ALEXANDRA

Are you a student?

JAY

*(hands her change)*

Been there done that. I double majored in Music and

JAY (cont'd)

Philosophy. Took me far, as you can see.

ALEXANDRA

I took English Lit, so I totally understand.

JAY

Don't get me wrong. Truly a privilege to live in a society where we're free to pursue the arts. I'm grateful for that, I truly am.

ALEXANDRA

Sometimes I wonder if I should've gone into something useful, like medicine.

JAY

Or engineering. My parents would've loved that.

They smile conspiratorially.

Alexandra breaks eye contact and reaches for the mug of chai another barista has set on the counter.

ALEXANDRA

What kind of Philosophy -?

*(she notices there's a line forming behind her)*

Oh, sorry. I'll let you get back to it. Good talking with you!

JAY

*(as she leaves)*

Anytime...

Alexandra sits at a two-seater table next to the window, the afternoon sun doing crazy things in her dark curly hair. She opens her book, sips at her chai...

## 15. Summer 2010

I am admiring the cut of the glass amidst warm voices and dim lighting. My feet in flats grip the lower rung of the stool; I lean my arms briefly on the bar. The bartender is bald. He's worked here twenty years, or so he said; the lemon twist in my martini is confirmation. I take hold of the glass between my index and thumb, swirling its sour.

"What a body," filters in from the man at my left. He exudes simple opulence: stylish shades and a parted-lip smile showing off near-perfect teeth. (He's had some work done.)

"Oh *god*," says the Hollywood man on my other side, flicking blonde hair out of his eyes. He folds tanned arms across his button-down chest, "She looked like a seventeen year old Marilyn, hot, hot, hot! But I don't think she'd ever done it before."

"Gotta shake it 'til you make it!" The girl beside him half-laughs over her drink. The men chuckle in agreement; she shakes her chest, laughing.

I turn to my reflection in the gilded mirror behind the bar. I'd been spared the afternoon show by a timely haircut: styled flush to my three-quarter moon face, dark spikes curving inwards. Usually, I'd de-stress by tousling the back into a mop of natural curl; now, all I can do is pull the points away from my eyes.

There's a painting over the bar, too, the body of a woman in a white dress loosely hugging herself, like bone-tired women in front of black and white homesteads. (I would paint her face wide-eyed, thin mouthed, creased forehead, chin pointed resolutely west.) Her black shoes blend into the dirt, her feet reduced to oval vestiges: they twist the faceless portrait, turn it out of proportion.

"Twenty minutes," the shaded man says, turning down the cuff of his jacket.

Draining his glass, the blonde man motions to the bartender. "Time for another?"

"Why don't we call her, Johnny?"

He leans across me. "I don't have her number."



“Ask for a phone book, she’d be in there.” The opulent man sniffs slightly and takes off his shades. How foggy his eyes look, about to blend off into the rest of his face. The irises dark peat earth, eyelids heavy, cheeks saturated, puffy. His nose is sharp, a fine point. I only have so many memories of his face, and this is the one I know I will remember most. (There’s cruelty in that.)

“Aw Alex,” Char teases from the other side of Johnny. “You were thirsty!”

My head is light: the martini glass is empty. “I didn’t want to make us late,” I explain. I am silent again.

A phone book falls heavily between us. Char slides it over, flips through the pages. I trade places with Johnny, shuffle the stool closer to her.

“You never finish them,” Char smiles proudly, as if I’ve won an Oscar or something. My fingers trace the designs cut into the stem of my empty glass. Johnny and the opulent man sit with their knees touching, giggling over the lemon fresh martinis. “Do you want another one?”

“No.” I relinquish the glass onto the bar with a curt click. “Find her number?”

Char’s eyes narrow as her fingernail surveys the printed columns. “She’s not in here. Hey, Johnny!” The two men turn towards her, grinning. “It’s not here.”

“Shit,” he slurs, “We’ll have to go meet the old girl then. Drink up, Harold!” He pounds back the rest of his as the opulent man sips, his upper lip perched on the rim. “Let’s go, kids!” Johnny tucks his Visa into the back pocket of his dark fitted jeans.

Char’s quick to follow him to the door; Harold prepares to disembark.

“Here, Dad, careful,” I caution, taking his arm as his feet make contact with the red tile.

“Thanks, sweetheart.” He makes wide inquisitive circles with his head.

“Where’s... where’s your sister?”

“Out front, with Johnny.”

“You girls are really...” his voice catches, and then continues, “really special.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Promise me you’ll be good to each other. Don’t grow apart. In the end you’re all each other has.”

“Okay, Dad.” I tighten my hold on his sleeve. It’s not Char I’m worried about.

We walk out of the bar, he fumbles for his shades. “Really special to me,” he says. Char and Johnny turn back on the corner, waiting for us.

### 307. Introducing, *The Paramount*

Characters:

KESTREL, a punk

CHAR, her younger sister

CAMERON, tries to climb through Char's window

LANDLADY, infected with something

THE EMPTY ROOM

SETTING: The front of a brick apartment building. Grey-streaked siding frames the entryway, an off-centre wooden door; yellowed newspaper taped over the front window. Two grimy plastic chairs on the small open porch. A half circle of frosted glass panels, some broken, arches across the front of the building, painted letters tacked across it spelling "PARAMOUNT". Two upstairs windows facing forward: the Stage Left window (SL) opens to KESTREL and CHAR's apartment.

TIME: The not-so-distant post-American future.

NOTES: When interacting with members of the audience, actors may feel free to improvise...

## 21. ALEXANDRA WEARS CONVERSE

INT. COFFEESHOP - CONTINUOUS

ALEXANDRA, still reading, holds the handle of her chai. Fading sunlight through the window. A punk couple enters through the front door, announced by tarnished silver bells hanging from the ceiling. Alexandra looks up vaguely before going back to her book. She is waiting for someone.

INT. ALEXANDRA'S APARTMENT

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

Sometimes, going through my hipster fringe day in my single room apartment on the fringe of hipster central, the stereotypes begin to scratch at me. How I listen to Bob Dylan during my socially-conscious breakfast of organic apple slices and fair trade coffee; the pencil behind my ear; the Converse I wear as I walk the couple blocks to the café.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

GARRETT enters, Alexandra waves him over. As they talk, her interior monologue continues:

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

I'm a writer and a twenty-something, I live in some small corner of post-modernism with a sense of lostness only staved off by my constant social activity and non-denominational Christianity. I haven't been to church in over six months. And here I am, at The Cure, talking Christian trends over coffee with Garrett. I am sick with hypocrisy.

GARRETT

*(staring intently out the window)*

...is this what Jesus was thinking when he was talking about the church? Really?

*(cont'd)*

GARRETT (cont'd)

It's this weird framework of false community: the hierarchy set-up, and plastic smiling people –

ALEXANDRA

Not all of them are faking it.

GARRETT

Some are and don't even know it.

ALEXANDRA

But how do you know what they're thinking? How can you tell the sheep from the goats, if you want to get into parables. And is it really so easy as that? I mean, I feel like I'm twenty different people in the course of a single day. Do you just take the average of all your selves and get your designation?

Garrett frowns, perplexed by Alexandra's interruption. He waves a hand as if pushing her comment aside and continues.

GARRETT

Changing the church has to start with people.

Alexandra nods faintly and sinks back, holding her empty mug.

ALEXANDRA

Is that what was bothering you yesterday? You sent me that text -

GARRETT

I'm getting to that, I'm only about umm -

*(he looks up at the ceiling, nods as if counting)*

- about halfway through. I wanted to talk about the church as a whole, the problems with it. You know, lots of people focus on the wrong things. God's power is everywhere, and it's not something to be glossed over. Just look at tithing for example -

ALEXANDRA

*(smiles weakly)*

Can we - take a break for a minute? I think I need a coffee.

GARRETT

*(teasing)*

You used to think you could hold out forever without trying the stuff. Tsk, tsk. And now, you're hooked. Do you take anything in it?

ALEXANDRA

*(returning from a distant thought)*

What? Oh, you don't have to -

Garrett is already walking over to the counter, smiling mischievously over his shoulder.

*Radiohead* plays. "Paranoid Android."

Garrett takes a battered leather wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. He says something to Jay as he hands him a five dollar bill.

Garrett's a good two inches taller than Jay, and 50 pounds heavier. Although she has known Garrett for years, the innocence in his face sometimes catches Alexandra off guard. The shirt he is wearing screams YELLOW!

He returns, carrying two coffees, the hand-made clay mugs delicate in his thick-fingered hands.

ALEXANDRA

How's Amy doing?

Garrett sits down, lets out a breath. He places a mug in front of Alexandra. She nods her thanks.

GARRETT

Okay. Her new job is exacting - she has three special needs kids in her class - but for all the stress, she likes being there.

ALEXANDRA  
*(taking a sip of the coffee)*  
Grade five, was it?

GARRETT  
A five/six split -

ALEXANDRA  
Cool -

GARRETT  
But back to what I was saying earlier...

A girl with dreads and an enormous jute scarf wrapped at least seven times around her neck, PROTESTER, comes by their table with a fingerless glove-full of brochures. She holds one out to Alexandra.

PROTESTER  
Yeah, if you come, that'd be right cool. Bring your friends.

ALEXANDRA  
*(smiles as she accepts the pamphlet)*  
Sweet, thanks.

The girl hands one to Garrett and moves onto the next table. Garrett falls to devouring the pamphlet, humming along with the *Mumford and Sons* song, "The Ghosts That We Knew," playing over the sound system.

Alexandra sits back in her seat, sips at her coffee and welcomes the café voices of mugs on tables and milk steamers, the lull of other people's conversations.

Jay looks over at her before heading into the back of the shop, a rag in his back pocket swinging...

**308. SCENE ZERO: Kestrel gives the dirt to a potential neighbour**

*KESTREL enters through the back of the theatre. She stands in the aisle and lights a shitty cigarette.*

KESTREL     *(to an audience member)* So you're here about the room, huh? *(nods towards The Paramount)* She's not much to look at, I know. Lots of problems. Sure, I can tell you. I live upstairs with my sister. Yeah. Cold in the winter, the heating's fucked. Some nights, you can hear things in the walls. Better than anything else you'll find around here, though. You're not from this part of the city, I can tell, that fancy scarf you're wearing. Did they cut your hydro? No shit. We're waiting, it's gonna happen, any day. Lucky we're this side of the border. *(draws on her cigarette)* Go ahead. Take a look around, don't let me stop ya. *(turns to mount the stage)* Oh. *(touches her face, which is scuffed up and bleeding)* Oh yeah. Don't worry about it.



## 6. Fall 2000

There are initials cut into the back of the rough vinyl seat ahead of me, bent paperclip scratches (or the pressure of a capped pen) ripping past fabric to the foam padding underneath. A + J in a heart. F-U-C-K, all caps. A tally of five.

Rattling of the half-open window, piercing laughter and bright chatter from surrounding seats, someone's discman too high on rap, turns me out to the traffic and house-fronts passing by, hands stuffed in the sleeves of my jacket.

Voices overlapping:

"You're a FAG, Jeremy!"

"Am not!"      "Did you see what she was wearing?"

"..math is killing me right now..."

"Come over, you can watch it on the flatscreen, we have like three"

"Sex!"              "Hahaha!"

"Oh my GAWD!"

A Scholastic book order open on my lap. The greasy pixels, the washed out promise of books, of "fun" books kids my age are expected to read. I read above grade level. (They did tests.) I watch less than three hours of television a week, an anime series Char and I watch at Dad's, mostly. This brief engagement with cartoon culture keeps me afloat during recess; kids my age don't talk about books.

"How are you liking school?" the counselor lady had asked in her comfortable office with stuffed animals neatly arranged in a basket, the board games in alphabetical order on the shelf.

(School wasn't the problem. School was never the problem.)

"I'd like you to fill out this graph," she'd said, placing a labelled but empty sheet of graph paper in front of me. A bouquet of coloured markers in a decorated tin can next to my elbow (something one of her problem kids had made). "I'd like you to fill it out according to why you think your parents got divorced. Is that alright? You don't have to do it if you don't want to."

I'd spent fifteen minutes filling out the bar graph. I made it colour-coded and neat. Almost all the bars were of equal height:

*Mom...Dad...Charlotte...Other...*

"This is interesting," the counselor had pointed out, "Look. The bar above your name is at 80 percent, while all of the other bars are only at 10. Can you tell me why you filled it out this way, Alexandra?"

I'm good at answering questions. I know what they're getting at. So while Charlotte still has sessions with the soft-spoken counselor lady once a week, I'm free to do homework in the waiting room while Mom and Charlotte "work things out".

But things don't work out. It doesn't make sense. I keep coming back to stand in front of the bar graph, during free reading time, the obnoxious bus ride home every day, the bars towering over me like library shelves, guilt stacked up to heaven.

Ash's parents divorced this year too. "They yelled all the time," she told me one day while waiting for Social class to start, "What about yours?"

No memory of abuse, of anger, of friction. Mom yelled at Charlotte sometimes, but Dad never raised his voice. So what else could it be? Who else could have caused the break?

If only I could figure out what had happened. (What I did.)

The door of the bus hisses, bangs open. A grade six boy in the seat ahead, a jerk who lives at the end of the street and spikes his hair. The points stick up over the back of the carved up seat, the initialed vinyl peeling away from the seams. Piercing laughter, swearing, kids trying to out-shock each other.

"Fag!" a boy behind me yells again.

The spiked hair. His clothes never quite fit. You could sometimes hear the rock music in the garage from down the street. My balled up hands emerge from my sleeves and tap him on the shoulder.

"What?"

Fist pounding into his cheekbone.

Shrink back in my seat, hiding behind the too thin pages of the book order as the boy begins to cry. Hear him over the rattling window and through the cut-up vinyl seat as I read every single book title and every single price listed underneath in sharp black font. When the bus stops at the base of my cul-de-sac, I push my way out and run all the way home.

### 310. SCENE ONE: Kestrel's post-America

*KESTREL is smoking on the porch, sitting with her feet hanging over the edge. She's listening to a scratched-up radio broadcast on a taped-up battery-operated clock radio.*

*Sounds of talking in the staircase. The stairs groan, a light goes on in the newspapered room. Another set of footsteps coming down the stairs.*

*CHAR opens the door. Looks at KESTREL's back. Silence.*

KESTREL     Those assholes in New York are calling themselves the first post-American city.

*CHAR moves over to the radio.*

KESTREL     Post-America's gone post-mortem. Don't they know America died a long time ago? We watched Detroit break down into dirt.

*CHAR turns off the radio. KESTREL puts out her cigarette.*

KESTREL     What.

CHAR        Where were you last night?

*KESTREL is silent.*

CHAR        I didn't know where you were.

KESTREL     Hey. *(sneers)* Don't act like you're Mom around here. I'm a big kid, bigger than you, and I can take care of myself.

CHAR        *(unfazed)* Where'd you go? The docks, the warehouse? Not Elliot's place.

*KESTREL rubs a hand over her shaved head.*

KESTREL     Yeah. Whichever one you want.

CHAR           You could have told me. What were you doing all night?

KESTREL     The usual. Elliot and Reece almost killed each other, over some bullshit, I don't know.

CHAR           *(seeing her face)* You were fighting.

KESTREL     Got a bit bloody, nothin' serious.

CHAR           I'm running low on bandages.

KESTREL     *(shrugs)* Like I said: scratches. Keep those band-aids for when we really need them, huh?

CHAR           I'm running out of places to look for those kinds of things. Kes... *(sits next to her)* I was thinking -

KESTREL     *(betraying the fact she cares)* Don't you dare. I'm gonna take care of it, and we'll have enough until the next ship comes through, okay? Don't do anything stupid.

CHAR           *(sighs)* Did you eat yet?

KESTREL     I'm dying for a coffee.

CHAR           You know there isn't any -

KESTREL     I was kidding.

CHAR           I'll bring something back.

*CHAR steels herself and drops from the porch onto the street, exiting SL. KESTREL turns the radio on. Music: Bob Dylan...*

## 23. PROTEST

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - DAY

*Bob Dylan* plays. "Ballad of a Thin Man."

ALEXANDRA and AMY stand in the midst of a protest. GARRETT is seated at a power-generating bicycle set up on a modest stage. Alexandra is cold, wearing an oversized knitted sweater over patterned tights; Amy is bundled in a long green coat and black toque, her face impassive.

Alexandra scans the crowd.

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

If you lived or socialized in Hipster Central, like I did, the chances of you attending the Occupy protest in 2011 increased by 37%. They actually did a study. The movement staked a claim downtown, powering the sound system by bicycle and they'd switch the pedaller off every fifteen minutes. A volunteer-run op. The protesters diverse as the messages they support: student activists, the poor in all their guises, parents and gangsters, men dressed in drag, women in dreads, some in suits but not many. Scatterings of children with face paint, screaming with excitement. Vague officers of the peace standing with their bicycles on the other side of a low iron fence, ignoring the Socialist imps writing Peace and Love around their feet with stubs of chalk. There's music, the ol' protest songs, and although everyone agrees on the 1%, in banners and cardboard scratchings, there is no set platform—except for the one supporting the bicycle.

AMY

*(loudly, to Garrett)*

You've got three minutes left.

GARRETT

This is fantastic! Amy! It's the most wonderful rush!

*(teasing)*

Wanna give it a try?

AMY

*(eying the bicycle: it's been spray painted orange  
and some of the spokes are broken.)*

No. Thank you.

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

There's too many people, too much sheep mentality;  
I'm fighting against a kind of elation at the vast  
expression of life: at the same time, I am aloof,  
separated by a wall of glass.

Someone in the crowd raises a hand, a tentative gesture, and without thinking she returns it. A connection? Or an impulse? Embarrassed, she pulls her loose hair over one shoulder and looks for the person the wave was intended for.

But the figure is moving towards the platform now, and Alexandra begins to see familiar hair, familiar eyes, a way of walking and dressing that is familiar. It's JAY.

JAY

Hi, Alex. What a place, hey?

ALEXANDRA

You remember my name, that's awesome! Jay,  
right? Are you protesting?

JAY

I'm just here to look around, actually. Wanted to see  
what it was all about.

Jay scuffs one of his frayed no name runners in the gravel and hurriedly removes his ear buds, tucking them into the pocket of his brown canvas jacket.

ALEXANDRA

Are you working today?

JAY

I have the weekend off. First time in a while. And,  
*(he begins to fumble for words)*  
tonight, after I leave here I mean, I'm going to, uh,  
this band I'm in. Do you...what type of music are you  
into?

ALEXANDRA

*(hesitates a moment, and then looks over the crowd as she searches her mental playlist.)*  
I think every genre has something good about it.  
Though, I'm more of a fan of alternative, or folk,  
singer-songwriter kind of stuff. I listen to rock, punk  
bands. Classical. I'm kind of all over the place.  
*(Her laugh is self-conscious and she starts fidgeting with the hem of her sweater)*

JAY

I could get an extra ticket, if you were interested.

ALEXANDRA

Sure! I'll pay you back.

JAY

Oh no, don't worry about it: I get a few comps.  
Perk of being a starving artist!

ALEXANDRA

This is so random. Both of us being here, I mean.  
I've always wanted to talk to you, you know, for  
more than five minutes.

JAY

Alex. I've wanted to ask you -  
*(looking her straight in the eyes)*  
Are you happy?

Garrett gets off the bicycle; PROTESTER pulls her dreads into a ponytail and takes over.



Garrett jumps happily down the stairs and puts an arm around Amy.

AMY

*(without looking at Garrett)*

I want to go home.

FADE TO:

### 311. SCENE TWO: Char finds an injured person

*As she makes her way down from the stage, CHAR notices someone in the audience. Her concern grows as she approaches them.*

CHAR           *(reaching the audience member)* Excuse me, are you okay? There's a lot of blood on your hands. Look. *(points, holding eye contact)* What happened? What are you doing out here dressed like this? You could've - you know what, never mind. Take my advice and stick to the main streets in the future. Here *(takes a roll of gauze from her pocket)* Oh, I carry gauze with me everywhere, just in case. *(motions to the injured hand)* Is it alright if I wrap that for you? *(winds the gauze around it)* You might need stitches on that one. Should hold you 'til you get someone to look at it. Sure you're okay? Go straight home, and don't take Erie Street for chrissakes. Worse than here. *(pats the person's back)* Take care.

*CHAR returns the rest of the gauze to her pocket and continues up the street...*

## 19. Summer 2013

Jive is across the street from Ley's Crematorium. Pretty depressing, if you ask me: drinking a cocktail, and out the window is a lit-up sign all turf green, while shadows of cars slide down the black strip between you and your body's after-death bonfire.

My attention is fixed, whetted by a beer and mystery cocktail. Recommended. An orange curl in yellow-pink alcohol.

Trance music underscores, thrumming bass line.

Next table over, a couple reminisces: *outdoor patios* and *croissants*.

Heavy golden smell of bourbon.

The bar is closing. Clattering into the dishwasher. A key holder latches the door, locking in patrons yet to pay bills. I'll have none. My sister's working tonight.

On the strip, people walking. (Out, this late?) Backpacks, t-shirts, bare necks. (In this weather?) Not quite summer, the orange-tinged sidewalks crisp and unforgiving. Need a hoodie at least.

The couple over have left. Silent pulled back chair, some crumbs on the padded bench seat. Low glass fixture hangs over two empty tumblers and a burnt-out tea light. Cleared. Wiped down. Chair pushed in. Char's co-worker, Reece, takes the empty cocktail glass from in front of me. Thanks.

Fewer cars outside, young woman in ripped jeans, hair on end. Evening bleeds into late midnight.

Char finishes her shift and sits with her coat in front of the window, blocking the Crematorium. Looks exhausted. Deep eyes flicking over mine. (Unscrambling my facial code? I want to go back to her apartment and sleep.)

"Did you want something else?" she asks, leaning back into the booth, "What did you think of the cocktail?"

"I liked it. Not too sweet."

"Oh," she apologizes, "Masha's already closed the bar."

"No worries."

Reece sits on the crumbs next table over and Hanna joins, pulls out the chair. Their clothes are black with open collars and their hair is sophisticated. Reece is clean shaven, his blond hair short on the sides and sharp on top, a thousand needles refined by gel. Hanna's fine brown curls are gathered in a loose bun, her face and figure petite, a sense of vegan meagerness about her, aided by the soft hand-knitted scarf she loops around her neck.

"So where are we going? We're going out, right? Not every day Hanna's back." Reece hits the table, hand gripped into a fist. "I miss my Hanna!"

Hanna tips her forehead towards him, taking his hand and opening it, "It's good to see you again."

"It really kills me when you leave."

A short pause, I almost miss it. Then Hanna smiles, too widely. "We should do something, absolutely, absolutely. Coming?" She looks over at my sister: it's a message, even I know. I suspect, too, that another set of chairs and tables features in my near future.

"Is that okay, Alex?"

I nod.

My sister sets her purse on the table and threads a tanned arm into her smart black coat. "Do you need anything else, Masha?" Char calls over to the bar, where a woman with short dark hair and muscular arms is draining the ice bucket.

"Hey, you guys go ahead. I'll catch up."

"You're a rock star!" Reece yells over, "I can't believe the drink orders tonight. For a Monday! What the hell?"

"Ah, it was a lot, but you know that's how it is. What matters is that we got it done." She takes out a tray of glasses from the sanitizer. Still foggy.

We gather ourselves up and away from the bare table. I shrug on a sweater, moving my body, one arm, two arms, rolling shoulders. I resist yawning.

"See you at the Rusted Anchor!" Hanna says as we pass out the glass side door. Masha raises a hand, fading with the inside of the bar.

We turn a corner. Wind picking at my bare legs. Our shadows walk beside us, half-formed in the dark windows of convenience stores and clothing shops. All the sound sucked out of the streets into the shut-up apartments. Only our shoes on the concrete, the vague illusion of hands at our sides; I take in the backs of heads, the mouth of the next street.

Reece holds a heavy wooden door open, hand at the grey flannel collar of his jacket. Thanks. A narrow entryway, carpeted, shelved, warm sconces like setting suns on the walls. Opens up to the left, jazz blue chairs scattered over cool tile, spectrum gliding into gold as we follow the polished bar top, the room exploding in coats and scarves and skirts and ties on stools and standing around in clusters with cups in hands, catching the light.

We find a free slot at the bar. Char and Hanna lean against the polished yellow wood, Reece already paying for drinks. My mind is adrift in the stream, with people's elbows and asses and shoulders pushing past. Char's teeth should be on the cover of some orthodontic magazine. Reece's arm curls on the bar, fingers questioning Hanna's shoulder. They say names I don't know and refer to past nights in the noisy haze.

Across from us is a man in a long dark coat with a tartan scarf thin and wound three times over his neck. His nose is wise. He draws my thoughts along, to another country, perhaps, sipping at a cognac in some dive bar in Paris. His hair is dark and full. His shoulders are angular, well read. His reserve intrigues me. (I make no move to speak to him.)

Hanna and Reece have turned to a couple next to them. Char swirls red around the inside of her glass.

"Are you okay?" she says after a sip, "You're not okay. Why don't you tell me that you're bored?"

"Hanna's here. You should be spending time with her before she heads back west."

"You're here too." Her mouth closes into a line, turns downwards. "I hate the bullshit you all give me. I can't have a real conversation with any of you. When I went to visit dad, you know what the dinners are like. All fake talk."

"You can tell me anything."

"I know. I just wish you'd tell me the truth. What's really going on in that head of yours."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you -" my words are fatigued and clumsy, "-but I don't want to hurt you, Char. I'm not bored. It's not that."

We're both leaning on the bar, drinking silently, in a pocket of some tired sorrow. Broken, as Hanna returns in her natural *joie de vivre*, and a man stumbles into us.

"Hello ladies," he gapes good-naturedly. His brown hair angle cut, his clothing form fit, metro. He's fidgeting with a fringed scarf. "How do you think I look, okay?" Legitimately worried, eyebrows bent.

Hanna coos "yes" as if to a child. Char rearranges the scarf over his plaid chest so the ends are even.

Looking almost as if he's about to cry with thankfulness, he takes us each by the shoulders and kisses our cheeks. "Goodnight ladies," he says, touched, "Goodnight."

Last call. Reece returns from another part of the bar with Masha on his arm. Char manages to order another round of drinks before the bar closes. (Or maybe it was already closed?) In any case, more beers, more wine. Thanks. The man in the dark coat stands, I watch him leave. He stares forward, wise nose leading out into the night. (I make no move to speak to him.)

"Where to next?" Reece is asking; his hand commands his glass of beer and there's a harshness coming into his face.

"We were going to head back to my place..." Char starts, uncertainly.

Reece invites himself. Hanna doesn't have the heart to leave him alone with a half empty glass of beer. Masha excuses herself: she works another job during the day, needs her sleep.

We finish our drinks, a cab arrives. Lonely downtown streetlights flicker over us. Hanna and Char are in conference (something about medication and being careful). Reece doesn't say much. Leans his forehead on the window.

Hanna pays the driver in bills. We get out at the paved cul-de-sac in front of Char's building. The security man at the front desk, in an ironed white shirt, buzzes us in. Her room is on the first floor, down the hall. We have to be quiet, Cameron's in the bedroom, asleep. Giggling girls, Reece on the stool in the kitchen. Just one light on. I balance my purse on top of my packed suitcase, set earlier that evening in an out-of-the-way living room corner.

Char starts cutting vegetables, Hanna carefully slides a metal pan from the drawer under the oven. I move through the open concept apartment towards Reece, resolved to be friendly though the night is long and the beer is sour in my mouth and I almost miss the seat and yes I am angry at him for coming. My hands flat on the mica-flecked countertop between us and Char's steady fingers.

"What if none of this is real?" he says, staring straight at the counter.

"What," I say, turning to him, "you mean, are we all brains in a vat?"

"No," he writes off the statement with a frown. "The time we have, it doesn't exist, and there's nothing to be done with other people in it."

"Reece," Hanna says, turning from the back counter where she's pouring us all Chilean wine, "I heard you went to Ireland last month to visit your aunt."

"Fuck her. Fuck everyone."

"Was it bad?" Hanna says, trying to soothe him.

"Hanna...Hanna. Why did you have to go? I thought when you left, that I'd be okay with Masha, but I, I really missed you."

"I'm sorry, Reece. Really. I miss you too."

"When are you coming back, to stay?"

"I love the Island," she says, busying herself with the glasses, "it's everything I could want in a place. I love all my friends here, of course I do. But I have to live somewhere that I feel like I belong. That makes sense, don't you think?" She sets a glass

of wine in front of each of us. "Here, hon," she says to me, and her thin face is straining with something. She turns away to help Char with the oven; they try to create some quiet mirth between them, some memory from Machu Picchu.

A warm pressure on my back, sliding downwards, into my - I turn against the weight of his hand until I can see his eyes, heavy-lidded, his down-curling lips. "I'm sure you're a good guy," I keep my voice steady, "but really, I don't even know you."

His eyes shrink into themselves, his mouth gapes. I stand up and cross into the living room, stumbling into an armchair.

"Find us some music, Reece! It's getting boring in here!" Char points to the laptop at his elbow (she didn't see...).

His body shifts mechanically, he unfolds the machine, opens a window. There's a line of sweat darkening the blue shirt, right between his shoulder blades.

As Hanna and Char set the baked hash brown mixture on the counter, club music starts playing. "Not too loud." Char looks over to the sliding white door that blocks off the bed and Cameron asleep in it.

Wine glasses and plates. Laps as tables. The hot meal, 3am portion, goes down with suppressed giggles. Reece devolves into vacancy. His plate half-full on the floor, body stretched full length on the couch.

Char and Hanna clear everything, whisper in the kitchen. I can see the whites of Reece's eyes as he stares at the ceiling.

I begin to fade. Room goes black, eyelids heavy, inevitable. Flashes, open eyes for a moment, as Hanna sits by him ("...called a cab...") her face turning as he tries to kiss her, ("...where's your keys...your phone...") Reece standing, a hand in his blonde spikes, Hanna wraps him in a scarf, Char hands him his cell phone, they walk him to the door.

"Kiss me, on the lips," he begs each of them. Hanna only smiles, and Char looks to the bedroom.

"Goodnight, Reece. Goodnight."

Final turn of the deadbolt.



Caught between sleep and awareness - the warmth of a blanket that Char drifts over me. My expression set to placid, I see it all from the inside, in the cues: the dishes on the countertops, the next bottle of wine. (They spill half of it on the floor.)

"We shouldn't have let him drink so much," Hanna's voice says.

"How long has he been on antidepressants?"

"I'm not sure..."

"He's been doing really well after work, barely finishes one drink. But last month. He and Elliot started pounding them back, and...he said some things. About you."

"I know."

The clink of a glass on the tile floor.

"Hanna, sweetheart, are you finding love on the island? You told me about that one guy..."

"What does it matter?" Hanna laughs... "Oh sorry," she whispers, "Sorry Alexandra, you're sleeping."

"No, she isn't," Char says with some bitterness, "She's faking it, she's faking it!"

"Let her sleep, Char." I can imagine Hanna placing a hand on her back, "Let her sleep."

Footfalls towards me in the dark and as I slip down into the realm of REM, past remembering...I sense her, studying my placid face, asking and asking and asking...

### 313. SCENE FOUR: Coffin Nail

*CAMERON enters, tinny dubstep coming from his earbuds. He kicks at the porch looking up at CHAR's window. He begins to climb the drainpipe towards it. KESTREL enters, sees CAMERON halfway up the wall. She enters the building, stomps upstairs.*

KESTREL     *(appearing at the window)* You're going to kill yourself doing that.

CAMERON     Jesus! *(almost loses his grip)* I'm not in position to talk right now, Kes.

KESTREL     You could use the buzzer, like normal people.

CAMERON     I could. *(doesn't move)*

KESTREL     *(hard)* She's not home.

CAMERON     Figures.

KESTREL     Wanna smoke? I'll meet you on the porch. *(closes the window)*

*CAMERON sighs, climbs down. Heavy footfalls as KESTREL descends and coolly exits the apartment.*

*KESTREL turns on the radio, sits on the edge of the porch and is joined by CAMERON. Offers him a cigarette, which he takes. The radio plays instrumental rock/ rap fusion.*

KESTREL     What's killing, Cam? You got a ship coming in today?

CAMERON     Yeah. I'm hoping it's going to take me on. Get me out of this shithole.

KESTREL     It's worse across the river.

CAMERON     You don't know that.

KESTREL I heard it. (*references the radio*) There's absolutely no power, food's scarcer than here, rats took over. (*Looking sideways at him*) She won't go with you, y'know.

CAMERON What, she tell you so?

KESTREL I know her. She wouldn't leave without telling me.

CAMERON You don't know her like I do.

KESTREL What, sleeping with her gives you privileged information? She's my sister.

CAMERON You wouldn't get it. You've never been with a guy.

KESTREL You think so?

CAMERON I can tell.

KESTREL (*pissed*) Think whatever you want. I hope the ship does take you on - and that it sinks, you dust sucker.

CAMERON (*sighs*) Listen. We gotta stop cutting each other up like this. It's really hard on Char, you know. I just want to do right by her, you don't have to make it so... ( *rubs his neck*) *fucking difficult.*

KESTREL I can play nice. Gave you a coffin nail, didn't I?

CAMERON One cig doesn't change much.

KESTREL Think of it as a peace offering. As long as you leave me the fuck alone. Char can worry as much as she wants. But when you start rifling through my shit -

CAMERON (*wary*) Hey, I didn't! -

KESTREL Then we've got a problem.

CAMERON     You think I went through your stuff?

KESTREL     Who else, asshole?

CAMERON     That Landlady of yours's gotta loose hold on the keys, man. If you need a scapegoat, gut her, alright?

KESTREL     Whatever. Just keep your hands off.

*Silence.*

CAMERON     What if Char does come with me? Life here's not that good. Maybe it'd be better for her. She wouldn't have to whore herself out at that bootleg joint, dancing with old drunks.

KESTREL     (*cut to the heart*) Have you told her that? Have you called her a whore to her face?

CAMERON     Don't get upset. You think it, too.

KESTREL     You don't know shit. (*stands up*)

CAMERON stays where he is. KESTREL draws on the cigarette, and calmly drives the end into his bare shoulder.

CAMERON     (*yells in shock, jumping up*) What the hell?

KESTREL     Here's a hint: calling my sister a whore pisses me off. (*jumps off the side of the porch and exits SL*)

*CAMERON blows on his shoulder angrily looking after KES.*

CAM           That's not what I meant...

*The radio remains on...Music by Joni Mitchell. "People's Parties."*

## 26. THE INDIE ROCK SHUFFLE

### INT. RECEPTION HALL

ALEXANDRA is dressed in a deep blue dress patterned with tiny white birds, loosely pulled in at her waist by a thin leather belt. She's wearing mustard yellow flats and black tights. She leans against the cash bar, sipping a glass of beer.

#### ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

Garrett and Amy had a good wedding, I guess. It was at this Sunday night church they'd been attending for young adults, the kind with a stage and young hipster pastors. Preaching the importance of sexual purity, or playing artsy video clips about tithing or mission work or other such badly disguised consumerist shit. I used to go once in a while. That's where I met Garrett, actually, and Amy soon after.

GARRETT, radiant, and AMY, bored in her voluminous white dress, pass by Alexandra on their way to the head table. Garrett waves happily. Amy half-smiles, but her heart isn't really in it.

### INT. CHURCH FOYER - CONTINUOUS

#### ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

The reception was in the hall on the opposite side of the building, across from the bookstore and coffee shop that carried overpriced gluten-free muffins and inspirational drek, all stamped with the church logo. If Jesus walked in, there'd be table flipping. I'm not one to judge, but look at the place. It's more like a mall than a home. But hey. Maybe my expectations are unfair. People don't want to *belong* at church. They just *go* there, and that's it.

### INT. RECEPTION HALL - CONTINUOUS

Alexandra at one of the guest tables, the bridal party back-dropping her thoughts.

ZEE approaches the table. She's a solid woman, 23, with short dark hair and sharp blue eyes. She's wearing patched jeans and a plain orange t-shirt with small holes worn along the edges.

ZEE

*(sits across from her)*

So here we are, at the same table for once.

ALEXANDRA

*(good-naturedly)*

Just the way your mom planned it, hey?

ZEE

Oh no. *Amy's* mom: total control freak. All the seating arrangements, bookings, hotel rooms, catering, organized by *her*. Gar would've been happy with a potluck at our place, but that's just "*not the way things are done*." Seriously? It's just a day. We were *this* close to having a dry wedding. Lucky that mom got in a word at all. She did the table centres.

ALEXANDRA

*(appreciatively)*

Very cool. I like this, the blue ribbon adds good colour.

*(picks up her half glass of beer)*

So! What's new? I hear you're directing again?

ZEE

That's correct. I'm ashamed to say it's for a high school production.

ALEXANDRA

*(with a half-smile)*

Maybe you can use your position of power to teach them to resist the twin evils of authority and conformity.

ZEE

But then they'd stop listening to me. You can see my dilemma.

ALEXANDRA

What's the play?

ZEE

*Seussical: The Musical.*

*(dryly)*

"A fun and magical romp through the imagination of Dr. Seuss." Our Horton shows promise.

ALEXANDRA

Send me the dates. I'll try to make it.

JAY enters. Alexandra looks up, surprised.

JAY

*(explaining)*

One of Garrett's friend couldn't make it. He called me, so - here I am.

ALEXANDRA

Zee, this is Jay. Zee's Garrett's sister.

ZEE

*(only as nice as she has to be)*

Hey.

*(studies Alexandra, narrow-eyed)*

JAY

*(warmly)*

Yeah, hey to you too.

ALEXANDRA

I guess you and Garrett hit it off at the protest?

JAY

We've had some interesting conversations at the cafe since. Good guy.

*(sits next to Zee)*

Okay if I sit here?

ZEE

Why not? Unless you're taking the no-show's seat. You're a free agent.

JAY

Not everyone would agree with you.

ZEE

Listen, I'm not getting into a free will debate at my brother's wedding, thanks.

JAY

Another time, then?

ZEE

Sure. Whatever.

ALEXANDRA

*(smiling at the two of them, a plan formulating)*

You know, we should all jam sometime. Garrett's pretty into piano, plays semi- professionally. Right, Zee? Jay's a guitarist.

ZEE

And I'll play the harpsichord. We'll be a cute startup band covering '90s hits. When we tire of that, we can move onto atmospheric jazz.

*(notices Alexandra looking at her)*

What?

ALEXANDRA

I can't tell if you're joking or not.

ZEE

Oh, just my style of humor, Alex. You haven't been



ZEE (cont'd)  
around, you've forgotten.  
(*narrows eyes at Jay*)

JAY  
(*to Alexandra, not noticing Zee's glare*)  
There's an open mic at the cafe next Thursday.  
Maybe you'd think about doing a set?

ALEXANDRA  
(*laughs*)  
Sure. Sure, Jay. Only if you play something, though.

JAY  
Deal.

Zee leaves the table, making her way over to the wedding party.

JAY  
Shouldn't she be in the bridal party? If she's  
Garrett's sister.

ALEXANDRA  
No. Zee hates weddings.

FADE TO:

INT. RECEPTION HALL - MIDNIGHT

Music. *Arcade Fire*. "Rebellion."

The room is dimly lit; the tables have been cleared. A scattering of people on the dance floor. Jay, Alexandra, Zee, and Garrett stand in a circle near the edge. Amy sits on an out-turned chair, sturdy-heeled shoes tumbled together by her naked feet.

Zee has her hands in her pockets and is looking down, shuffling her feet. Jay, Alexandra, and Garrett pick up on her dance and follow suit.

The song ends. They relax.

ZEE

I call it "The Indie Rock Shuffle."

JAY

Cool, Zee. Hey, you know, they do something similar at Smashing Pumpkins concerts.

ZEE

*(ignoring him)*

It's getting late. When do you want me to cart the equipment out by, Gar? The theatre needs it back at noon tomorrow, no later.

GARRETT

Oh! Didn't Amy tell you? Everything needs to be out of here tonight. There's a wedding rehearsal or something in the morning.

Zee is noticeably frustrated. Alexandra looks over at her.

ALEXANDRA (V.O.)

Weddings. Hate them, love them, whatever. You're this age, and your friends start getting linked up, start growing apart. It's a part of life.

FADE TO:

### 314. SCENE FIVE: The Landlady

*The LANDLADY exits The Paramount with a broom and begins sweeping the porch. A blue discolouration over the right side of her face and bare forearm.*

*She coughs.*

*She sets the broom aside and walks laboriously down the stairs to straighten the FOR RENT sign tacked onto the front of the porch.*

*She looks out into the street.*

*KESTREL exits the apartment building, stopping slightly as she notices the LANDLADY.*

KESTREL     *(aloof)* Any takers for the empty room?

LANDLADY   *(shakes her head slowly)* Not one. No one comes by anymore.

KESTREL     Too bad.

LANDLADY   No one wants to live this close to the river.

KESTREL     Can't say I blame them. I can taste the dirt in my teeth when I wake up in the morning. Should do something about that. You're supposed to take care of this wreck.

LANDLADY   *(turning on her)* Did I tell you about the former -

KESTREL     Yeah, yeah. Heard it a million times. Lady needs to get a new story.

LANDLADY   Don't "lady" me, asshole. I'm the bitch who takes your rent money. Whe - *(turns aside, coughs)*

KESTREL     Who'd wanna live here with you breathing down their neck all the time? That's what I wanna know.

LANDLADY    (*regaining composure*) Is your sister in?

KESTREL     Ummm, let me think? No.

*Before the LANDLADY can respond, KESTREL drops off the side of the porch and heads off SL.*

LANDLADY    That attitude. (*shakes her head*) If I didn't already have an empty room to fill, I'd kick her ass.

*CHAR re-enters SR, carrying a couple plastic bags of dubious contents.*

LANDLADY    (*taking up the broom again*) Morning, Charlotte.

CHAR           Morning. (*mounts the porch*) I've been meaning to talk to you. I just wanted to apologize for the other night. I was supposed to let him in, but I guess I was just so tired, I fell asleep.

LANDLADY    I wish your friends wouldn't come by so late.

CHAR           Oh, it's just Cam.

LANDLADY    Tell him I won't be so forgiving next time. There are other residents in this building who do not appreciate being woken up by yells and shouts and what have you.

CHAR           I'm so sorry. It won't be a problem. (*moves towards the door*)

LANDLADY    (*bars her way in with the broom*) Another thing. Your rent is late.

CHAR           (*sheepishly rebalancing the shopping bags in her hands*) I'll have it to you tomorrow. I just have to...wait for the next ship.

LANDLADY    Fine. In cash, remember.

CHAR           *(nods)* Have you found someone for the room yet?

LANDLADY    No.

CHAR           It's really too bad. Such a nice room.

LANDLADY    *(softening)* People just don't understand. He was so famous. Did I ever tell you -

CHAR           Um! *(shifting)* I should get these groceries upstairs.

LANDLADY    *(sneering)* Groceries. *Suuurrrre.*

CHAR           Thanks for understanding about Cam. *(she enters the building, her feet quick and light on the stairs)*

LANDLADY    *(calling after her)* Remember! In cash! *(coughs)*

*The LANDLADY looks out into the empty street once more, picks up her broom, and re-enters the apartments.*

#### 4. Fall 1993

Alex sets up her easel next to her dad's, both facing the same red and yellow tree that marks the edge of the acreage; beyond, dark evergreen and fragrant wood, tinged gold, just starting to shed for the winter.

Her dad places an 8 by 11 canvas in front of her and one in front of himself.

"It looks like fireworks," Alex says, stuffing her black mittens into the pocket of her flannel coat.

"You're right, sweetheart. It's a beautiful tree. Are you warm enough?"

"Mom made me wear *three* sweaters *and* a jacket. I'm going to roast!" she laughs because "That's what Mom always says, like we're turkeys or something!"

Her dad takes a box out of the long black duffel bag. He unlatches it with his quick hands, always a tone darker than hers, even in the summer when everyone is tanned. "What colours do you want to use first?"

Her dad lowers the box a little so Alex can see inside. A jumble of paint tubes, each no thicker than a finger, fill the wooden container. She picks out light brown, deep maroon, what her dad tells her are "vermillion" and "ochre". He prepares a palette for her. "Go ahead and start." He pulls her toque down over the tops of her ears. "There."

Alex's paint brush is made of soft black tufts that are perfect for impressions. She splotches ochre on the grass, blotting fallen leaves and the rough bark of the tree, fumbling with the twist in the lower boughs before looking over at her dad. His purple and black windbreaker swishes as his hand moves across the canvas; his earth-coloured eyes are languid, floating back and forth, from canvas to tree to canvas. "How's it going?" he asks her, noticing that she has stopped painting. "Can I see?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Alex accents each with a slight hop. He crouches down next to her and she leans into his shoulder.

"Very nice!" he says in approval and Alex beams. "What about the sky?"

"Blue."

“Blue?” He cranes his neck. Alex looks up too. It’s too sunny to be blue and there are clouds, veiling the space above the brilliant autumn tree. “What do you think?”

She asks for white and pale pale yellow, for bluebird, and Payne’s Gray. She dabs some on her dad’s nose and they pretend it’s by accident.

“Sorry, I didn’t see your paintbrush there, I walked right into it.” He scrunches up his face. “Is my nose still blue?”

“Yes!” Alex laughs.

Her dad wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “Is that better?”

“No!” she says, even though the paint is gone.

“How about –” and he catches her close and wipes the tip of his nose on the top of her head. “Now your toque is blue,” he teases, lightly tapping her nose.

Alex paints the sky, wiping her brush on a t-shirt rag between colours. Cracking twigs and underbrush rustle from the passage of small animals fills their silence. Before the shadows fade to twilight, Alex finishes her painting.

“You’re faster than I am!” her dad says but doesn’t look up. “Did you want to go show Mommy?”

“Can I find some pinecones first?”

“Sure, sweetheart. But don’t go too far, okay? I’m almost done, and we still haven’t eaten supper. Okay?”

\*

Three pinecones, four acorns, and a rusted bottle cap later, Alex finds herself in an unfamiliar part of the underbrush. The low hedge she had been following is nowhere to be seen: only rocks as big as she is, half-buried in bramble, and grey tree trunks that shoot up into the dark canopy of dried leaves that crack and scratch against iron branches.

“Daddy?” she asks the forest, “Dad!” Her fingers begin to worry at the fringe of her scarf. She calls again, circling around, running towards what she thinks is the end of the woods. It turns out to be a clearing. She backs out, terrified. Which way had she

come? Had she passed through autumn and come out on the other side when everything was dead? The sky is a pale uniform grey; a grim diffusion of light.

She cries. Afterwards, wiping her nose on the back of her hand and pulling her toque down over her ears, she begins to gather sticks. When you are lost, she remembers, stay where you are. The sticks she chooses are thick with sharp splintered ends. If you move around, she tells herself, no one will be able to find you. She makes a pile and sits beside them, facing towards where the trees crowd thickest, watching and listening. Crying has warmed her face and washed out her eyes. She buries her chin down into the folds of her scarf and puts her hands back into her gloves and into her pockets. Every time she exhales, a small cloud of smoke goes up to join the grey in the sky as the trees grow darker and the shadows pull further and further until they cover everything in a deep silent darkness.

A sound in the bush, a low growl. Alex sits up straighter, gripping the bottle cap in her pocket, reaching for one of the sticks. Should she make a sound? Scare it off? Does it want to eat her? Should she run? She moves to get up, but her feet are weak and tingling from sitting in the cold. "Hey coyote!" she yells, "Get out of here, or I'll hit you!"

It rustles closer, she can see the outline of its ears and the smoke, coming from its mouth in short panting breaths. *Heh. Heh. Heh.*

"Go away!" she threatens. It comes closer. Should she throw a stick at it? She tries to reach down for a couple extra, in case she misses the first time, but the animal is closer now and she is afraid. "You're just a dog! A big scary dog! Can you sit, stupid coyote? Sit!"

The shadow sits.

"Down," she motions, and the animal sinks down to the earth and whines. She throws the stick in her hand and it jumps, catching the stick neatly in its teeth, padding forward to place it in front of her. It licks her hand. "Marmalade!" she laughs in relief as she recognizes her lifelong companion. "What are you doing out here? Are you lost too? I thought you were a coyote."



Marmalade sits in front of her and starts “talking”, whining and barking in short, impatient bursts.

“You want me to throw the stick again?” Alex uses another command, one they taught Marmalade when she was still a puppy: “Home, Marmalade.”

She barks.

“Not right now! This is my stick.” Alex picks up one with a splintered end. “Just in case. Home!”

With Marmalade, Alex feels bold, out of an adventure story with quests and swords and elven halls, out of the books her mom reads to her. Robin Hood and St. George and Joan of Arc. She follows the golden retriever through the shadows, the tree trunks stark black against the navy-blue-grey fabric of night, leaves and sticks cracking underfoot, the call of night birds and the eerie cry of a coyote.

They break the tree line just south of the firework tree. The easels are still there and the paintings are dry. Marmalade lopes up to the house which is fully lit, like a jack-o-lantern. Dimly, as Alex studies her dad’s painting, she hears the sound of the front door opening and her mother and some strange voices coming down the steps, down the loose gravel walkway towards her. Flashlight beams scroll over the painting, pulling out the violet tones of his sky and the melancholy face with thick lips and a strong chin set in the trunk of his tree. There’s something else in the painting, but before Alex can grasp it, her mom turns her around and holds her close while she cries. One of the strangers radios her dad, who is still in the woods looking for her.

“I hope you made him wear layers,” Alex says as they walk back to the house. “I can see my breath.”

## 29. GAMES NIGHT

INT. GARRETT AND AMY'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Games, clothes, and other domestic debris has been pushed into corners to make room for company. ZEE is leaning on the arm of the couch, while next to her, JAY tries to keep himself from shuffling too close. GARRETT and AMY share the armchair. ALEXANDRA sits on the floor, her arms resting on the second-hand coffee table. Everyone except Amy has a mug within reach.

In front of Alexandra is a silver bowl of microwave popcorn and a smaller clay bowl from which she is drawing paper slips and reading them aloud in a measured announcer's voice, giving nothing away:

ALEXANDRA

"My song would make people addicted to popcorn and it would be called 'Pop Star'."

Okay, cool...

*(she draws another)*

Next one is: "Suddenly, no one would be able to remember their phone number. Be called 'Hello, Operator' in honour of the White Stripes." Nice! I like that.

*(she draws another)*

"No one can resist the cha cha! Dancing everywhere! On tables, in cafes, in lecture halls! Cha cha cha!"

Laughter.

ALEXANDRA

Two more -

"It's only a song, it can't change the world."  
and:

*(reading from the last slip)*

"The song would remove fear of judgement so everyone could just be themselves. No title."

ZEE

That's obviously yours, Alex.

ALEXANDRA

It's not your turn to guess! Go ahead Jay. Who wrote what?

JAY

The first one, about popcorn? Was that you, Zee?

ZEE

Umm. No.

*(it's now her turn)*

Alex, yours was the last one.

ALEXANDRA

*(jokingly mad)*

Fine.

ZEE

Gar's was the cha cha.

GARRETT

Ohh! Guilty as charged!

He does a bit of the cha cha in his seat. Amy is unresponsive. Garrett tickles her playfully; she hits his hand, almost pleased.

ZEE

Amy's was about popcorn, and that leaves Jay's - the song makes everyone forget their phone number. Interesting concept, actually...

ALEXANDRA

You cleaned up again!

GARRETT

Yeah, stop showing off for the new guy!

ZEE

*(angry)*

I'm not.

ALEXANDRA

Another round? Or are we played out?

GARRETT

*(stretching)*

Why don't we, you know, just taaalk for a while. Oh!  
And drink coffee! Who wants?

Everyone's hand goes up, except Amy's.

Garrett tries to get up, but Amy's on top of him and doesn't move. He makes a show out of falling back again, straining up; Amy doesn't budge.

GARRETT

Heeeeyy! Heeeeyyy! Listen!

AMY

Stop it!

*(a hand on her stomach)*

I don't feel good.

GARRETT

*(still playing)*

Oh!

*(whispers)*

Sorry.

Garrett picks her up and replaces her gently on the chair. He exits to the kitchen humming the violin line from Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2.

Alexandra picks up a guitar from where it leans precariously against a clear plastic set of drawers. She plays a few chords, fingerpicks.

JAY

*(to Zee)*

I texted you yesterday.

ZEE

I got it.

JAY

You didn't answer. I thought maybe I had the wrong number.

ZEE

I'm sure Alex made sure you had the right one.  
*(death stare in her general direction)*

Alexandra feigns innocence, tuning the low E string.

ALEXANDRA

*(to Jay)*

So Jay, have you had any gigs lately?

Zee rolls her eyes.

JAY

Nah. One coming up though, on the 14th. I was thinking -

Alexandra proffers the guitar.

JAY

-oh thanks - I was thinking

*(earnestly to Zee)*

-that I could get you a ticket.

*(he plays a tentative chord)*

Amy gets up from the chair, disappearing through the kitchen to the bathroom.  
The door slams.

Startled, Jay looks askance at Alexandra.

ALEXANDRA

Slams to make sure it's closed.

JAY

*(back to his question)*

Are you...free, that day? Zee?

ZEE

*(sighs)*

Is Alex invited?

JAY

Oh. Yeah. Sure.

Jay hides his disappointment in an E minor chord.

GARRETT (O.F.)

*(knocks on the bathroom door)*

Amy! Are you in there? I have to go!

Pleeeeeaaaasee?

ALEXANDRA

*(to Jay)*

That also is normal.

ZEE

How would you know? This is the first time you've hung out with us in weeks.

ALEXANDRA

I've been busy. Working on my play, that post-apocalyptic one I was telling you about. And, you know, thinking.

ZEE

About what? Something deeeeeep, I'm sure.

ALEXANDRA

No...just the whole idea of authentic identity. Is it possible for a person to be everything they are in one moment? Manifest all the parts of their identity at once? Where I am and who I'm with, circumstance, all of it changes the way -

She's cut off by Garrett's entrance from the kitchen, his hands loose in front of him, his eyes unfocused.

ZEE

What's wrong, Garrett?

GARRETT

*(quiet)*

Amy's on the floor and there's blood...Zee...

ZEE

*(she stands, walks quickly but calmly over to him, taking charge, as if directing)*

Garrett, I need you to call an ambulance. Do you have your cell on you?

GARRETT

Yes.

*(fumbling at his jeans pocket, his eyes still far away...)*

ZEE

Okay.

*(takes his arm and leads him back to towards the bathroom)*

Alexandra and Jay are left, immoveable, in the living room.

JAY

What do we do?

ALEXANDRA

*(tonelessly)*

Wait for the ambulance. Stay out of their way. Zee has first aid training. She'll be fine. Amy's gonna be okay.

Alexandra's hands are gripped together, her knuckles straining.

JAY

I've never had to wait for an ambulance before...

Alexandra keeps staring towards the bathroom.

Sound fades out as the paramedics enter and Jay points them through.

Alexandra watches them, emotionless.

Time begins to skip:

blink, the empty kitchen;

blink, Zee and Garrett outside the bathroom, watching;

blink, one of the paramedics running back through;

blink... Amy on a stretcher,

her face pale, her body strapped in,

the paramedics with faces set forward;

blink... Garrett

following... blink ...Zee

on her phone ....blink....

blurring...

Black.



[...]

[...]

[...]

[-----]

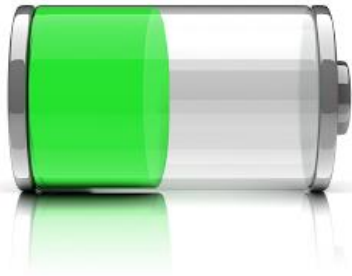
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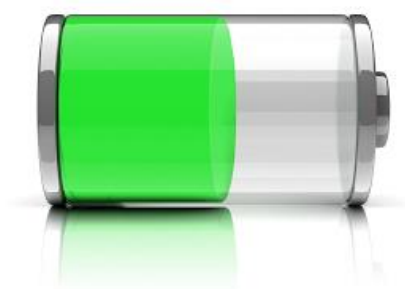
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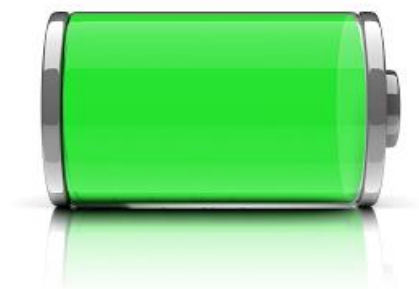


**Connect to Power**











[ - - - - - ]

-

-

-

[...]

[...]

[...]

[*Play.*]



[...]

Remember the summer Marmalade died?...

[...]

...we

...out at the cabin

Hanna had

that leech on her

leg.

Oh yeah.

...she burned it off with a lighter...

[...]

....threw it into the copse by the beach, to curl up

and die....

I was on the back porch. Marmalade came padding across the lawn towards me. The bottom teeth on the right side of her mouth were black. She'd picked up the leech in the woods and it had latched onto her lip. Stretched across, like a band-aid. And Marmalade

was whimpering, her tongue running over it, turning her head sideways trying to gnaw it off.

I banged into the kitchen, grabbed the box of table salt, poured the whole thing over her nose - that *shhhhhh* flow of salt - stars sticking in her fur and coating the leech until it released, writhed in the grass, relaxed into death.

You never told me that story.

Marmalade pawed at her nose, afterwards. She licked it a lot. I brought out her water dish, she lapped up the whole thing, and lay down and -

She died?

No, course not. I don't remember how long it was before.

She was a good dog. I'm glad we didn't have another one after her.

Me too.

[...]

[...]

[*Play.*]

I thought of colours....

...threads along the black....

shuffling green turquoise aquamarine

vermillion and ochre

waving in the sky

quiet cloth...

stars...

SCENE (((((((((.....))))))))))

*ALEX is lying on the porch...Marmalade licks her bare knee...she is wearing ragged shorts...a t-shirt ...*

ALEX           *(waking up)* Marmalade?

*The LANDLADY, half her face metallic blue, panics onto the porch from inside the Paramount.*

LANDLADY   The generator surged -! I don't know what number I'm on -! The buttons don't respond, the override must have failed -!

ALEX           Hello?

LANDLADY   *(startled)* Oh! You? What are you doing in this sce-  
*(covers her mistake with a cough)* here?

ALEX           *(remembering)* Is Amy okay?

LANDLADY   Amy? No. That's not, that's not right! Who are you?

ALEX           Alexandra.

LANDLADY   You look like the other one, the bald one. I hadn't noticed. *(struck by a thought)* Does that mean you're all -? Does that mean -? *(she hurries back into the Paramount)*

ALEX           *(to Marmalade, ruffling her fur)* Hey bud. I thought you were dead.

Left alone with only Marmalade for company, Alex stands shakily. She's on a grey-washed porch, sky just as bleached by wind. There's dust collected in drifts along the cracked side of a bus shelter across the street; building roofs downturn in shadow at the approach of night.

At her side, Marmalade is striking gold, too bright, an icon from a golden age.

"How did we end up here?" Alex asks.

Marmalade's brown eyes are luminescent, no worse for wear, given her twelve or so years underground.

*The LANDLADY exits from the Paramount, frowning.*

LANDLADY The Empty Room is locked. Did she misplace - did I - misplace the key?

*Her fingers rest on either arm. One flesh, one metallic blue. She coughs, lifting a hand to her mouth. She is surprised to find blood in the palm of her hand.*

LANDLADY That explains it. I must be dying. Or dead already. These are only echoes, mixed up somehow. I may as well watch, while I can.

*The LANDLADY sits on one of the flimsy plastic chairs.*

*ALEX and Marmalade remain in the same position on the porch.*

*An atmosphere of mourning.*

*Char enters, her hair gathered up, wearing a skirt and fitted blazer.*

LANDLADY Hey! Hey, you, young lady! What are you dressed like that for? Are you crazy? In this neighbourhood? You're gonna get yourself killed!

Char glances over the Landlady, frowning. "I'm sorry if my way of dressing offends you, but you don't have to be rude about it." Brushing a stray hair back from her forehead, she continues past, self-assured.

ALEXANDRA

Char!

*(jumping from the porch)*

Wait up!

*(touches her shoulder)*

Look, Char: Marmalade's not dead.

"You look..." Char blinks, "What street is this?"

ALEXANDRA

I'm not sure.

"I don't recognize...I must have taken a wrong turn. Dammit! Tonight's a buy-out and I'm going to be late." Char takes her iPhone, bright pink and out of place in her red-nailed fingers, from the pocket of her blazer. "Can you," her voice is direct, "tell me how to get back to 17th Ave?"

ALEXANDRA

Char, it's me.

"You know, I thought you looked familiar. From high school, no, summer camp? One of those networking conferences. Listen, I'd love to catch up, but I'm really on a tight time - ah fuck!" she holds up her cell, "No service. I just need to get to 17th, if you could -"

Alexandra takes her hand and places it on Marmalade's back.

"Alex," Char says (recognition and a question).

ALEXANDRA

I have no idea.

"You look different. God, I am so sorry for being such a bitch. I'm not myself these days, work's been hell-"

ALEXANDRA

Marmalade's not dead.

"I can see that. Are we dreaming?"

ALEXANDRA

Are we someone else's dream?

"We should ask."

They approach the LANDLADY.

"Where are we, exactly?"

LANDLADY (*rubbing her blue arm*) Ah. It's difficult to say.

"I have a Communications degree. Try me."

CAMERON *enters, dressed as before.*

CAMERON (*to ALEX, sullen*) Nice wig.

ALEXANDRA

(*confused*)

Um. It's not a wig.

CAMERON (*to CHAR*) Hey, baby.

"What are you wearing?" Char scans his scruffy hoodie, perplexed, "I've never seen you in anything so...*dirty*."

CAMERON (*sidling up to her*) You dolled up for me, how *nice* of you. Ooh, I like *this* - (*he runs a hand down her waist*)

Char holds his hand still, moving it gently away from her. "How did - how did we get here? What's going on?"

CAMERON I have something to ask you, Char. Don't get weird on me, okay? Kes doesn't want you to go, but -

"Kes? Who are you talking about?"

CAMERON (*to ALEX*) See? You don't even count. (*pulling CHAR towards the door*) I'll tell you everything upstairs, baby, I've got it all planned out.

"What does he mean?"

Alex shrugs. Char follows CAMERON into the Paramount.

*The LANDLADY bends stiffly at the waist to pet Marmalade.*

LANDLADY    You don't seem too worried. About them going off together.

ALEXANDRA

Char takes care of herself; always has.

LANDLADY    You gave him a cigarette burn. Last night. Char wasn't happy, I could hear her yelling all the way on the other side of the building, and then you went stampeding down the stairs, slammed the door - which by the way, would cost you if that doorframe came loose. You seemed pretty pissed to me.

ALEXANDRA

*(confusion growing)*

I didn't give him a cigarette burn...sometimes I wanted to.

A scratching from under the patio underscores Alex's thought; a moment later, its greasy fur powdered in white dust, a rat scrabbles up the side of the porch, its tender pink nose lifting towards the Landlady.

ALEXANDRA

But I don't smoke...

Marmalade lowers her body, ivory teeth glistening. Her growl rumbles across the grey porch boards, resonating with the rat's quivering fur. Trembling, it backs off, drops off the edge of the porch, and bolts towards the bus shelter, abandoning its hide-out, hoping for escape. The golden retriever is after it, powerful as a *Messiah* chorus yellow-white-golden-tan streaks of speed and sound, exploding off the porch down the street -

ALEXANDRA

*(finding a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of her shorts)*

But I don't smoke...

*She nonchalantly takes a green lighter from her other pocket, taps out a cigarette, and expertly lights it.*

KESTREL    So what if Char goes with Cam? I can still keep the room, can't I?



LANDLADY I'm getting out of the landlady business.

KESTREL Oh yeah? To do what? Not much else around, unless you wanna work the docks.

LANDLADY I have this condition. Nothing to be done about it.

KESTREL You're dying?

LANDLADY I was recharging, everything was the set up correctly, I'm certain. One of the circuits must've gone, or the generator surged. I'm old parts, Alex. And I'm alone. It's better this way.

ALEXANDRA

Your face. It's almost completely blue.

LANDLADY You're old parts, too, you know. How are you...so alive?

*Silence.*

KESTREL Not contagious, is it?

LANDLADY (*turning away*) I don't think so.

*KESTREL draws on her cigarette. She goes over to the radio, pretending not to care, and slides the top switch to "ON".*

Crackling, jumbled voices: edged sighs from the end of the world.

KESTREL (*eyes on the radio, comments:*) It is the end of the world, isn't it.

LANDLADY (*nodding slowly*) This one, this one is ending.

*KESTREL, lifting the cigarette to her mouth, is startled by a blue dot on her fingernail.*

LANDLADY All the things I collected and kept, all the memories I hoarded away and watched in the dark. All dust.

KESTREL *stares at her in horror.*

ALEXANDRA

You're not the Landlady anymore. You're someone else.

LANDLADY I can be both: her and I, me and her. Just like you, Alex.

Alexandra drops the cigarette and grinds it underfoot.

Marmalade's return is announced by the clatter of nails on the sidewalk concrete: *clip clip clip clip*. There is blood around her muzzle. The empty skin of the rat is gripped in the side of her mouth, greasy black and grey. She releases the remains at Alex's feet. An offering.

CAMERON (*appearing at the window*) Hey! Hey Kes! I told you didn't I?

ALEXANDRA

(*staring at the skin*)

What'd you tell me?

CAMERON She'll tell you! (*laughs*) She's going to come down there and tell you!

*The stairs groan under a slow and steady tread. CHAR, dressed in the bulky formless clothing from SCENE ONE, exits the Paramount lugging a suitcase.*

KESTREL (*crossing her arms*) So. You're going.

CHAR Cam's right. We should get out of here, start somewhere new. Otherwise, we'll be caught dead with dust in our lungs. Christ, I hate it here!

ALEXANDRA

Then you should go. I'm not going to stop you. After all, you love him, right?

Char blinks, her deep blue eyes, deep like a glacial lake, cold and fresh and edged with frost.

KESTREL      Go ahead. I don't need you.

ALEXANDRA

Text me, when you get there?

Alexandra catches CHAR in a hug.

"Don't let them make you sad, I promise I won't," Char says, pulling away. Her red-nailed finger traces a line under Alex's eye.

KESTREL      Look: *(she waves her hand in front of CHAR)* I'm dying.

CHAR            *(pulls back the sleeve of her coat, showing a deep blue patch)* So am I. So's Cam. We're going to see the world before the end.

KESTREL      Post America's gone post mortem. There's nothing left to see.

*CAMERON tramples down the staircase and bursts out the front door.*

*CHAR pulls down the sleeve of her coat, kisses Alexandra's cheek.*

"Later, sweetheart."

*CAMERON and CHAR exit SL together, holding hands. CAMERON's hand is wrapped in gauze.*

Whining, Marmalade shuffles her nose under the rat skin, half lifting it, pushing it towards Alexandra.

ALEXANDRA

And what am I supposed to do with that? What the hell is that good for?

A cocking of the head, to the side, like a question. Dogs have the intelligence of three year olds, Alex heard once. Three year olds ask a lot of questions.

From around the corner comes a man, a dark haired man in a black and purple windbreaker. His eyes are peat and his teeth are straight and Alexandra sees him as if through a prism, his face fractured in time.

ALEXANDRA

What makes the sky blue?

"God paints it, sweetheart," Harold replies, "Sometimes it's blue, sometimes Payne's grey, salmon, tangerine. Really look at it."

ALEXANDRA

*(looking up)*

It's uniformly grey.

LANDLADY *(stirring herself from the porch chair)* It's the actor! *(standing, smoothing her pants)* Well, it's been a long time, but your room is free, I'm happy to report! The only thing is...no matter. I'll call a locksmith, and then we can discuss rent. What are you paying, Kes? Though for a street level room, I'd consider lowering -

KESTREL Hey, I'll move into the empty room, if it's cheaper!

LANDLADY Too late, *kiddo*. The actor's back.

KESTREL No way that's your actor. The one you tell stories about all the time? Ugh, I'm sick of him already.

"I'm not sure what you mean." He is smiling at them. "I'm on my way through to the DIA. They're hosting a stunning exhibit of Michelangelo's sketches, and I'm dying to get a closer look."

LANDLADY Stay for a while. Maybe you'd consider taking over as proprietor? I'd give it to you, gladly. I'm afraid...I'm on my way out.

"Not my scene, dear. Though I appreciate it." Harold is stopped by something he sees. The good-natured eyelids lift, his long fingers reach for Kes's hand. "Cobalt blue," he says, honed in on the toxic fingernail.

KESTREL (*pulling away*) We're all getting it, whatever it is.

Dropping her hand, he nods. "I'd rather not talk about this. It's under my clothes, thank God."

ALEXANDRA

Is Johnny here with you?

"Yes. He's going to bring the car around."

KESTREL They stopped making cars fifteen years ago. Ran out of gas (*she smiles humourlessly*).

LANDLADY (*to Harold, angry*) If you won't take the room, at least take the time to apologize for all the trouble you put me through. Having to explain to your agent I'd no idea why you'd gone. The costume jewelry and old photographs I had to empty out of the drawers. Your daughter crying in the middle of the night. (*seeing Alex, she stops herself*) Wait...that's not you, I meant the other - no. It's wrong this way. This was supposed to be a dramatic meeting, and now look: this is a grand mess. If only...I wanted there to be a last hint of what could have been. But there is none. Only what was, and what is.

*This consumes her attention. She remains standing, but vague.*

Creaking down the street, the carcass of a convertible, fold-back top black with mildew, sides eaten away by rust, crawls and collapses in front of them. Although the door is dragging, half-hinged and gaping, Johnny rolls down the window and flashes them his Hollywood smile.

"The Paramount, we've arrived!"

With some difficulty, he pushes his way out of the car, aviator sunglasses shielding his eyes from the apartment building's obvious decay. "Miss me?" He kisses his partner, glowing with devil-may-care charisma. His gaze catches on Alex. "You didn't tell me our girl was going to be here! What's shakin', Alexandra?"

ALEXANDRA

*(returns his kiss of greeting)*

I don't think you're going to make it to the DIA.

Thinking she means the car, Johnny waves it aside. "Oh I know, I know. Needs a tune-up, but we didn't have time on the way, and besides -" he finds one of the plastic porch chairs, "if we'd taken it in, maybe we wouldn't have run into you! Funny how the world works, isn't it?"

Alex's dad takes the chair opposite and they hold hands.

"No chance of a drink, Alex, is there? I'm parched. The air here-" Harold pauses, "gets in your throat."

ALEXANDRA

*(to the Landlady)*

Um, excuse me? Ah -

*(pauses: there is no name to supply)*

Alexandra goes over to the LANDLADY and places her infected hand on her infected arm.

ALEXANDRA

Do you have anything we could drink?

LANDLADY *(rousing herself, remains distant)* I'm sure I could find something. *(she shuffles into the building)*

Alex's dad notices Marmalade, flat on the porch, her nose next to the rat skin. "Is that - ? Looks just like a dog we used to have. Same colouring, and look, there's even a tear in her ear, just like Marmalade-" Sitting back, he looks away, busying himself with Johnny's hand.

ZEE enters, her short dark hair standing on end, her eyes red-rimmed. Blue up and down her neck like a lace collar.

ZEE

Fucked up. Totally fucked up.

ALEXANDRA

Is Amy okay?

ZEE

You didn't tell him, did you? You just let him trip over himself like an idiot. "Zee, want to go out tonight?" "Zee, there's this sick band, are you free?" "Zee, I love -"

*(rubbing her forehead)*

*(whispers)*

Jesus.

ALEXANDRA

*(apologetic)*

I thought...it wasn't my thing to tell.

ZEE

You didn't warn him? That he'd be disappointed, the way I was? Life... lets you down, you know?

ALEXANDRA

Last time we talked about it, you were thinking maybe, you know, you might be bi? But I guess that's not the case.

ZEE

I had a crush on you for the longest time, and you pretended you had no idea. Why didn't you say anything?

ALEXANDRA doesn't say anything.

ZEE

I saw you and Jay at the wedding. You had a connection. But then you try to pass him off to me? That's fucked up, Alex. You know what? You're

ZEE (cont'd)

afraid of complication. That your life's gonna get messed up with someone else's and you'll lose yourself.

ALEXANDRA

*(takes a steadying breath)*

I shouldn't have done that, trying to set you two up. I should've talked to you. But... I couldn't change what I felt, Zee. I'm sorry.

ZEE

I wasn't asking you to.

*(takes a breath)*

I'm *not* asking you to. Just, stop it with the match-making, alright? That would take a lot off my mind.

Alexandra nods. Zee leans against the side of the porch.

ALEXANDRA

*(nodding towards SL, as if down a hospital hallway)*

How's she doing?

Zee lets out a breath. Looks down the hall. Shakes her head.

JAY enters, his nervous hands leading him, blue running in strips down his arms. A fringed maroon scarf is wrapped three times around his neck.

JAY

I don't know what I said, but I'm not sorry. We'd be good together, Zee. Can you see that, please? At least.

ZEE

For all your degrees, you're not very bright. Could you have picked a worse time for this? Absolutely not. Garrett's a mess, and Amy -

Silence.



JAY

I just want to talk to you.

ZEE

*(fights it, then nods)*

Alright.

They walk over to the right side of the porch and sit next to each other.

*The LANDLADY returns, carrying a tray of lemonades - somehow, enough for everyone.*

*She distributes first to Harold and Johnny, then ZEE and JAY.*

*She holds the tray tentatively as she makes her slow stiff way down the steps.*

*She places the tray on the edge of the porch and takes a glass in each hand.*

There is a glass left on the tray, smooth cylinder misted over as if someone has breathed on a winter window from the inside. Clouded with pulp flakes, granules of sugar settled in dunes along the bottom. Round slice of lemon floats. Slice of bitter sun.

ALEXANDRA

Who's that one for?

LANDLADY   Someone you wouldn't expect. *(hands Alex one of the glasses, sips at her own)* There isn't much time left.

ALEXANDRA

*(frustration building)*

Shouldn't we be doing something? Instead of drinking lemonade on the front porch, like everything's okay?

LANDLADY   *(apologetically)* It was all I could find. *(sips again)* What could we do? It's already done. The blue will spread. I'm just trying to make it easier on you.

ALEXANDRA

Easier on me? What about easier on them?

LANDLADY     That's not up to me, is it? You're the common factor.

ALEXANDRA

*(pours out the rest of the drink on the ground)*

I don't want this to be easy, I've never wanted it to be!

LANDLADY     I don't want you to get hurt.

KESTREL     *(angry)* Too late, lady. It's too fucking late for that.

GARRETT enters from SL, hands in his pockets.

*KESTREL sees him, her eyes scanning for any sign of gang swag. She picks up the rat skin.*

KESTREL     Looking for something?

GARRETT

Yes.

KESTREL     Let me help.

*KESTREL walks up to him, affable until she is within arm's reach.*

*She punches him in the cheek,*

*he folds forward,*

*she rubs the inside of the rat skin over his face.*

KESTREL     Hypocrite! How do you like that, fucker? Eat rat, eat shit!

GARRETT

*(letting her, his thoughts far away)*

I don't understand.

KESTREL    You're a fake, soft, plastic man! Giving in, like you had to be like the rest of them, with your overblown ego and religiosity! Fuck 'em! Fuck 'em! Fuck!

*She backs off, breathing heavily.*

He stays on the ground. Bits of rat flesh in his eyebrows. His glasses are on the ground next to him. He does not pick them up.

GARRETT

Alexandra?

KESTREL    Too late. Too late. Post-America's gone post-mortem!

GARRETT

Alexandra?

KESTREL    The blue will fill, cover, bury into us and this will dissolve into a dream.

GARRETT

Alexandra.

KESTREL    A dream of dust.

GARRETT

*(thinking of Amy)*

What's keeping me alive?

*KESTREL runs off.*

The LANDLADY takes over the last glass of lemonade. She stands ready next to Garrett.

ZEE

*(to Jay)*

There! Do you see now?

Zee breaks away from his arm. She comes around the front of the porch and sees Garrett.

ZEE

*(running to her brother)*

What the hell? Who did this to you? Gar? Your face -  
If I wasn't a pacifist - Fuck!

GARRETT

*(smiling weakly)*

I wish you wouldn't swear so much.

ZEE

God doesn't care. There's so many other things,  
more important things -

*(she helps him up)*

Who did this?

GARRETT

No one. She ran off, anyway

Garrett takes the lemonade from the LANDLADY and gulps it down. He hands the empty glass back.

ZEE

Anything broken?

Garrett shakes his head, tearing up. Zee walks him to the porch.

Char runs down the empty street, her golden hair loose, wearing a smart black coat over her grey ghetto rags, her fingernails red, her hands free.

"The border's closed," she tells the Landlady, out of breath. "Cam stayed, he's going to work on the docks, but I can't stay there- the smog- the dust! Where's Alex?"

"Gone," the Landlady says, pointing one of her cobalt fingers east.

Char digs in her coat pocket, presenting a gold key on a blue ribbon and lace bow. "Cam gave it to me: The key to the new world, he said. I figured out pretty quick where he'd gotten it from."

Char's lips close suddenly; she's spotted the two men, facing each other in the plastic chairs, hands on their knees, communing, skin all dyed, as if there's a blue-gelled spotlight focused on them. Even their clothing is tinted.

"Dad, Johnny?"

Char is taking the gauze from her pocket, she rushes to them, begins wrapping Harold's arm. "I need to use your phone!" she commands the Landlady, "they need a hospital!"

The Landlady can feel the resistant weight in her hand, the brush of lace over her knuckles. "Ah," she says, "There's one in the empty room. I'll let you in."

Char helps each of her dads to standing. They watch her without speaking, eyes open with wonder, distant smiles. As if the blue has made them timeless, as if they are preoccupied with the still moment of living.

The Landlady holds open the front door as they follow Char, holding hands.

The welcoming hall of the Paramount is a brief wave as the building heads up worn carpet stairs and fades down a long hall, punctuated every so often by a dim wall sconce throwing light up at the ceiling. A soft splash of gold. On the right, the door to the laundry room is open, black corners against the newspapered window, a web of cracks fracturing the old yellow columns. The door to the empty room is too white, with a circled silver triangle embedded into the metal-plated surface.

LANDLADY (*Leaning into the door as she finds the lock*) I can feel the life going out of me.

"You look as if you could use a doctor yourself."

LANDLADY (*shakes her head, slowly*) How far has it spread?

"My legs." Char grimaces, turning out her ankle. Her concerned hands rest on Johnny and Harold's arms.

The Landlady turns the key. Music. From inside the room. Soft, sustained, contemplative. Someone playing the guitar.

Harold and Johnny move through the doorframe.

CHAR           You can charge the call to my room. I know how expensive it is for you to have an open line, with all of that shit going on out there. "I'll be right out. Can they stay while I go to find Alex? She shouldn't be out there alone."

LANDLADY   Of course, sweetheart. Of course.

*CHAR enters the room.*

*The LANDLADY closes the door.*

*She locks it.*

[...]

[...]

[...]

The Landlady stands anxiously on the edge of the porch. Next to her, Marmalade sits back on her haunches, ears lifted, sniffing at the threads of air.

LANDLADY   Can you smell her? Alex, Marmalade. Can you smell her?

Marmalade turns from the street, her hind legs following - *click click click* - across the grey boards -

*Click*

*Click*

*Click*

- down the sagging front step. She pauses. Bends her neck and touches the black end of her nose to the upturned rat skin. A low growl in her throat. Takes off down the sidewalk, around the back of the bricked up church.

The first star appears.

ZEE

*(approaching the LANDLADY)*

Excuse me. You own this place, right? Any chance of a bed for my brother? It's too late to take him home

ZEE (cont'd)  
and he's worn out. Do you have a nightly rate?

LANDLADY Of course. Modest. Don't worry about it now. We can talk in the morning.

*She takes the key out of her pocket, shuffling to the door. Her movements are rigid, as if the blue on her skin is cold metal, binding her muscles, rendering them immobile. Rusted together.*

LANDLADY (to Jay, sitting on the porch) Come on in, young man. I can set you up with Char's old bed.

Jay looks up from his hands, in his lap. Legs hanging over the side. "I kind of wanna wait for Alex."

She has a blue hand on his shoulder. Her fingers twitch, then loosen. "Alright," she says, "don't be too long; it's getting late."

Brother and sister pass after the Landlady. Zee's eyes on Garrett's bowed back.

From his seat, Jay hears a far-off saxophone, colouring the darkening sky deep blue pain shot through with violet. He thinks of his last gig, spotlight filtering through smoke from cigarettes and effects machines. His ass aches for bass in the dead boards, for his voice to tear through him and shake the cracked glass shelter across the street. No amplifying equipment here; his opening note is swallowed: granules have built up, mite by mite, and the apartment is ringed in dust drifts. He lifts his shirt, undoes the silver-plated buckle, opens his jeans. Soft protruding stomach over the white waistband of his boxers: blue fingers reaching up, curling around his belly button. Imprint of life.

*Clickclickclickclickclickclickclickclick*

Marmalade rounds the church at a clip, pink tongue loose flap down her chin.

Alex appears, following her out of the brick, holding a sharpened stick in her right hand. Her hair is tangled up in blue, her forehead is blue, looks as if she's wearing a headband and has dyed her wild curls in crisp winter sky. Sweat leaving dark circles in the grey armpits, her knees are scuffed and bloody. Glasses miraculously holding place.

Marmalade slows to a trot, pacing in front of the porch - *click click click* - slowing, mounting the stairs

	<i>Click</i>	-letting herself settle heavily on the porch,
	<i>Click</i>	her tongue waterfalling over her paws.
<i>Click</i>		<i>Heh heh heh</i> making mist punctuations
		in the last touch of sundown. Her nose is
		blue.

Alex leans against the FOR RENT sign. She grips the stick. She senses Jay sitting around the corner, on the other side of the painted wooden pillar.

"How are you doing?" she asks.

"Fine." His baritone sigh. "Better. How about you?"

"Yeah. Haven't slept since last night, I keep seeing the medics carrying her out -"

"Garrett was pretty beat up about it. Zee took him home."

"She told you, huh?"

"Oh, she told me."

"Sorry. I should have said something, maybe. But I thought, I honestly thought, you know, that you guys could've been good."

"I was forcing it. I should've taken the hint."

"I guess things never work out the way you think they will."

"No."

Alex messes up the back of her hair. She uses her back to push off from the sign, walking over to the rat skin tumbled over itself, fur white with dust.

"It didn't deserve to die," she says sadly, "It was innocent."



Jay jumps down and comes around the side, his runners leaving imprints in the dust dunes.

"Here," he says, taking the stick from her, "let me help."

He slides the end under the skin and turns. He carries it to the bus shelter. Using the sole of his shoe, he pushes a foot-full of dust aside, and lowers the remains.

"Dust to dust," he says.

Alex fades in, crouches down and uses her hands to gather a grey mound over the skin.

*No Lead up. Small hints you reflect on after the shock's worn off: she wasn't feeling well, Garrett's avoidance, his show of everything's okay. And what could I have done anyway? That's the thing. We all shuffle through life in willful unknowing, easier because of it, but taken aback, undercut, when met with abhorrent circumstance. Shreds what feeble cloth you'd wrapped around yourself. Lose track of who you were trying to be. Trying to be strong in spite of it. I remember crying once, alone in my room, and even then, not quite knowing what it felt like...*

"Jay," the Landlady says from the doorway, "There's a space for you."

Alex feels his arm around her shoulders. "Don't be sad," Jay whispers, sound nearly removed from his voice, "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

She nods. Feels his arm dissipate, his feet on the stairs, the click of the front door catching.

The mound isn't all grey, she notices. It's a shadow now, light from the Paramount crowning the edges, a small crown, of silver.

The door opens. Marmalade's long shadow flickering over the silver, her nails *click click click...* fading into the Paramount.

The door opens one more time.

Brush strokes on the porch. Separate beats on the stairs. Shuffling over the dust strewn sidewalk, the empty street. Stopping next to her.

"I have so much to answer for," Alex tells the Landlady, "And no answers."

"I've put them in the empty room. They're safe in there. The city's about to collapse, and my battery life's almost gone. Without you, I can't save them. You're the connecting factor, remember."

“We’re all just memories, to you. But I’m still living this, don’t you get it?”

“I can’t give you a future. I can only save your past life, your past thoughts. Give you a chance to work it out.”

They are standing in front of the white door, with the sideways triangle encased in a silver ring, gleaming.

“What about you?”

“There isn’t enough room.” The Landlady smiles mechanically, up to her eyes in blue.

“Why us? Why us and not you?”

“You’re the best of who I used to be,” she says, as if it should be simple.

“Remember? I’m old parts.” She unlocks the door, and nods slowly. “Ahh. What would you like to listen to?”

“There’s this song. “Fragile Bird.” You have that one?”

The slow nod. “Goodbye, Alex.”

From inside the room, green and gold notes; a breeze lifting blue threads of her hair, Alex is filled with her own visions and the brush of tree branches, alive now, verdant life -

The Landlady closes the door behind her, closing in the hum of vermillion and ochre and violet voices, saxophone, guitar, aching, whispers. Holds the key in the lock, the other hand in her pocket -

tccchhk

tcccchkk

tcchhhkkk

tchk.

[...]

[...]

FADE OUT:

THE END

## EPILOGUE

You're saying it shut down recently?

As far as we can tell. The room was unsealed, free flow of air, bacteria cultures. A body, a human body, would be stripped clean in a matter of weeks. But she - it, still has patches of the skin intact.

What do you think it was doing here? There haven't been colonists in this sector for almost fifty years.

I can't say at the moment for certain. Though, from the items on the shelves and what we found in that bin over there, it looks like she could have been a collector.

Based on make, condition, and apparent habits, what would you say - ?

Oh, some kind of domestic cyborg, without question. She must have picked up these things outside. The question is: why? There was nobody to collect for. I read about a similar case, of a collecting cyborg on one of the abandoned colony ships they pulled in a few years ago. He had been the only one on board for about 20 years. D'you know what he did, the whole time? He found everything red in the whole goddam ship and arranged the parts in whorl patterns, all over the docking bay.

Short circuited. Some kind of neural-integration malfunction.

Could be. Some have hypothesized that he was emulating an old earth artist, Van Gogh. There's mounds of data on the correlations -

So you think our cyborg had a similar glitch? Some kind of OCD impulse?

Maybe. Let me take one more look here...Oh... this is interesting...

What's that? A cord?

Running from...looks like...there's a docking port here. That's...

Well, don't waste your oxygen with mumbling. Is it going to be a problem?

No. Well, not now. She's adapted her cerebral integration outlet to accommodate...this.

What the hell is that?

Some kind of media device. Very old. She ran the cord to her temple input and carried it around in her pocket.

What for?

I don't know.

Why didn't it download what it wanted and discard it?

If she was a collector, maybe this piece had special significance. Maybe her hard drive was damaged somehow and she needed additional data storage? I'm afraid it's all conjecture at this point.

Fascinating, really, Doctor. But what else can you tell me? We've spent enough time on this domestic. What I need to know is if this facility can be up and running before the commander's arrival.

Well...As far as we can tell, the damage is surface only. Toxin levels minimal. The generator's got a lot of rust in her, but nothing we can't fix up. Once we get the power situation in order, should be a walk on the Moon.

Good.

Um, may I - ? Just one more thing, Captain.

Yes?

I'd like to study this cyborg case further, on my own time of course. Do I have your permission? I'd only need her memory card and the media device. The rest would be disposed of, no problem. I know you dislike clutter.

If it interests you that much, you have my permission.

Thank you.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

### What is a novel?

This thesis project could be called a povel, a cross between a play and a novel, due to its use of different formats: a chapter might be a scene from a film, a scene from a play, or a section of prose, or something else. Mixed genre, however, is probably the best way of defining *shuffle*. Can a mixed genre work of fiction, incorporating stage performance, film footage, and short stories, still be called a novel?

One of the main threads developed throughout Mikhail Bakhtin's critical work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, is the idea that Dostoevsky's writing works because it is dialogic. Dialogic, as opposed to monologic, prose incorporates many diverse viewpoints without favouring one over the other. Dostoevsky, unlike his rival Tolstoy, does not push one "moral" onto the reader; rather, his novels engage with human conflict, doubt, passion, and ambiguity. Kurt Eisen celebrates Bakhtin's insights on the nature of the novel, extrapolating, "[t]he novel is uniquely the genre of futurity, Bakhtin insists, but only insofar as it opens up new combinations, new dialogues" (45). *shuffle* takes the fairly standard *bildungsroman*, or more specifically the artist-focused *künstlerroman*, and revitalizes it by combining multiple styles of discourse: prose, screenplay, poetry, and stage play. By playing with genre, *shuffle* mixes up the traditional idea of the prose narrative, incorporating voices of individuals, culture, and technology not only through characters, but through the shuffling together of different genres.

According to Eisen's reading of Bakhtin, a story is a novel if it is of a certain length, features an episodic plot, and if there is dramatization of heterogeneous discourses throughout, "whatever [the story's] actual genre" (41). *shuffle* is a novel in that it is a book-length collection of scenes, dramatizing Alexandra's interaction with family members, Christian and hipster sub-cultures, and memory, exploring her various modes of self-identification in these social contexts. The inclusion of different narrative styles, including voice-overs, scripted dialogue, first person flashbacks, and objectively filmed group scenes, creates what Eisen calls the "novelistic world of 'heteroglossia,'" or multiple voices (43). The "multiple voices" at work are not only the characters and ideas within the scenes, but the genres themselves.

In his creative thesis, *Failures in Apathy*, Jon Flieger uses mixed genre to indicate failure; I use mixed genre to represent the complexity of social identity and the influence of memory on how characters understand themselves, each other, and their environment. *shuffle* demonstrates that the boundaries set on genre are arbitrary and rhetorical. By integrating genres together and challenging those boundaries, *shuffle* explores the manifestations of self characters employ in various circumstances under varying social demands. Discovery of self and negotiation of identity can only result from considering all our expressions of self, hidden or public. The integration of genres does not represent failure, but the growth that comes through working through chaos, like the confusion we see in "SCENE (((((((((((.....))))))))))." Identity is negotiated in the context of society, relationships, and personal expression and mistakes. Not repression, but acknowledgement is necessary for Alexandra to reach the point at the end of the

novel where she can bury her shame and re-enter her memories with a new perspective in order to renegotiate her sense of self. *shuffle* breaks into different perspectives near the end: from seeing things solely from Alexandra's point of view in acts one and two, we are aligned with the Landlady (especially jarring when the reader enters the Paramount for the first time, as Alex is not in the room with them), and are given an intimate moment with Jay's stomach. Not only does the end of the book play with boundaries of time and genre, it also plays with the boundaries of protagonist alignment.

The act of reading itself is dialogic, made up of, as David Patterson points out in his article "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Dialogical Dimensions of the Novel," a combination of discourses and responses to them - including the reader's. *shuffle* demonstrates the reader's interpretive power, inviting the audience's involvement in "interactive" scenes where Kestrel and Char converse with people on the wrong side of the fourth wall. Although the reader is on the wrong side of the page - if we consider the page as the stage and the reader as sitting in a theatre seat responding to the performance - the novel exists because they are interacting with it. This idea of participation and involving voices not typically engaged by a certain genre is a dialogic one.

Bakhtin describes the novel not as a genre, but as a force, a "dynamic presence which characterizes the movement of response, the act of creation, and the search for truth" (Patterson 131). *shuffle* tracks the main character, Alexandra, as she grows from an observer into a participant, from listening into contributing, from merely recognizing her mistakes into negotiating herself through them. Characters of diverse lifestyles,

beliefs, and economic brackets influence Alexandra's growth and challenge the reader to consider their own prejudices and assumptions; as the lines between genres break down at the end of *shuffle*, all that remains is the movement of response and creation and re-creation as a way to negotiate the fluid boundaries between memory and the present, self and the other.

### **Structure**

*shuffle* follows three distinct storylines, each set within a particular genre. The first full scene is formatted as a screenplay and follows the linear plot in which Alexandra tries to negotiate the ironic complexities of 21st century hipster culture. The second storyline is written from Alexandra's perspective, in prose, and takes place over twenty years through a series of flashbacks. The third storyline follows Kestrel and Char's post-apocalyptic experience living in a dilapidated Windsor apartment building; this stage play is set in the near future. Scenes from the three storylines are "shuffled" together, creating a disjointed effect that allows the reader to piece together order and meaning from the juxtaposition of scenes. For example, "Fall 2000" and "SCENE ONE: Kestrel's Post America" explore Alexandra and Kestrel's use of and attitudes towards violence. As the scenes are playing out on an iPod, new juxtapositions are possible.

Previous to all the storylines, I've included a short visual/ sound piece, meant to evoke the experience of selecting "Shuffle" on a 4th Generation iPod Nano (a green one). Halfway through the novel, I've included charging icons to remind the reader that they are "listening" to the scenes on a media device. The "Epilogue" is meant to explore



this framing device further by suggesting that the whole of the novel is taking place in the head of a cyborg (which is why we can “see” the scenes play out) through media technology, and that she either collected the memories and spliced them together, or had the memories herself from her early biological life. The fluidity between fact and fiction, and present and memory, is hopefully emphasized by this insinuation.

The novel also reflects the structure of a three-act play: act one as the introduction to the characters and their points of conflict (“HIPSTER CENTRAL” to “PROTEST”), act two as a complication of the drama and a building of tension (“SCENE TWO: Char finds an injured person” to “GAMES NIGHT”), the intermission (charging icons), and act three (“SCENE (((((((((.....)))))))))” and the “Epilogue”), where we reach the climax and resolve into the denouement. In *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, David Mamet argues that human lives are inherently theatrical: he explains dramatic structure as “an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis” (87). Although some would argue that this approach to storytelling simplifies drama as it excludes experimental theatre, a beginning, middle, and end framework was the stability my project required given its play with genre. Myles Weber writes in an article on Mamet’s work that “when dramatic structure is employed expertly in a play, it brings the subconscious and conscious into alignment” (137). The “message” of a creative work cannot be constructed consciously; the dialogic encounters between discourses has to grow organically through the playwright’s process. Throughout *shuffle*, we are aware of Alexandra’s anxieties about her identity and her dissatisfaction with hipster culture. The

subconscious and conscious overlap in act three, indicated by the jumbling of a nightmarish post-apocalyptic landscape and Alex's various manifestations of identity. There is no clear "take home point" from Alex's story. However, there is a rising arc of action, a traumatic event, followed by the denouement in SCENE (((((((.....))))))).

Catherine Burgass's article, "A Brief Story of Postmodern Plot," was helpful in theorizing some of the effects I tried to employ in structuring the plot of *shuffle*. She notes that most novels disrupt linear progression through time by using memory and omniscient asides, while at the same time normalizing these effects so that the reader is assured of the stable progression of time (401). In a way, *shuffle* does progress in a linear manner, using memory as a way to reflect on the past in the prose sections, but altogether moving the reader forward to the crisis at the end of act two; "SCENE (((((((.....)))))))," however, takes the three distinct story and time lines and mashes them into one confused landscape of characters and genres that transgresses what was previously established in acts one and two. "Postmodern fiction," Burgass writes, "is often and appropriately characterized by a concern with ontological categories, an exploration of the boundaries between fact and fiction, the world and the text" (399). The fictional world of the post-apocalyptic *Paramount* (the past apocalypse indicated by the prevalence of dust and the apparent economic collapse) is infused with "real" people from our cultural present. The reader may feel that although Zee and Alex are talking in front of the Paramount, they are really in a hospital hallway waiting for news of Amy's condition. This confusion of time and place reflects the fluidity of boundaries that we habitually take for granted as being fixed.

One further aspect I would like to discuss in relation to Burgass's article is the cyclical structure she attributes to postmodern narrative style: "Clearly, beginnings and endings have a special function...marking the entrance and exit of the fictional world and its parallel time. There is a structural circularity in these novels that confounds linear time" (405). At the end of *shuffle*, we learn that the playlist of scenes was being "viewed" by an outside observer, a cyborg, who could have "listened" to this playlist any number of times. The "shuffle" function allows for new orderings and juxtapositions of the scenes, and through this further confounding of our sense of the linear, allows for a cyclical story that itself is no longer linear or predictable. When the captain agrees to let the doctor study the iPod and the cyborg's memory hard drive in the "Epilogue", this creates a new cycle of story: the doctor will not only be reviewing the playlist, but the cyborg's memory of it, from an outside perspective.

#### **A note on music, theatre, and the fine arts**

*shuffle* would not function as a novel without the incorporation of musical motifs: a playlist acts as the framing device for the novel; scenes are "shuffled" together as if on an iPod. Songs mark transitions and often reflect Alexandra's mental state during scenes. For example, at the beginning of "Protest", "Ballad of a Thin Man" plays. One of Bob Dylan's more controversial compositions, the lyrics tell of a journalist who enters the Beat scene trying to figure out what's happening. He is met with various members of the fringe culture, but he can't quite grasp what they are saying, what it all means. Sexual imagery suggests homosexual tendencies on the journalist's part, though

it is uncertain whether this is a calling out, trying to get the journalist to accept his own “fringe” status, or a way of Dylan exploring his own sexuality. The ambiguity is interesting, as it highlights the difficulty in nailing down both the Beat movement of the 50s and the Occupy movement in 2011. The use of Bob Dylan also creates a juxtaposition between the movements: Alexandra is hesitant to accept the protest, as it may only represent crowd mentality; whereas she believes in the possibility of social change, the use of “the ol’ protest songs” seems to be weakening the protest’s vision, as it depends on the nostalgia of the past to change the present. Is this a misuse of the past, appropriating it? The irony of this song’s use is foundational to our understanding of Alexandra’s Hipster Central. Alexandra’s story overlaps with history, as there actually was an Occupy protest in Edmonton, where “[d]ozens... camped out overnight, with a mish-mash of students, labour union representatives and homeless people waking up together” until they were expelled by police two months later (CBC).

With freedom of media, changing ideas about musical boundaries, and access to equipment, the “iTunes generation” has redefined how music is accessed and made. Al Shipley writes about current trends in popular music:

Those indie bands all got their own synths and beat machines, and began reflecting the diverse tastes of the iTunes generation with greater freedom. Genres became blurrier and harder to distinguish from each other, while dozens of new subgenres sprang up overnight...

I find the part about the blurring of musical genre completely applicable to my project, as set boundaries of genre established in act one and act two become fluid in act three. The integration of prose, script, and screenplay (with a touch of poetry and

iconography) challenges the set boundaries we tend towards when we think of each genre. As art moves in a post-postmodern direction, this freedom to trouble definitions of genre as well as identity opens up methods of storytelling.

As I've done with expanding the form of the novel, so a theatrical production of *shuffle* could open up possibilities for storytelling on the stage. As much of *shuffle* questions the boundaries between past and present, sexuality, identity, and the use of rhetorical discernment in various social contexts, the integration of intermedial elements into a live performance would reflect the cyborgian idea of transgressing boundaries, which is one of the main themes holding *shuffle* together. Bruce Barton's "Paradox as Process: Intermedial Anxiety and the Betrayals of Intimacy" (2009) discusses attitudes towards the integration of media into theatrical performance. He acknowledges that some critics see intermediary theatre as a threat to corporeality of actors' bodily performance and the "liveness" of theatre (576). He supports intermediary theatre, however, claiming that the use of projections, sound, video, and other media generate intimate "exchange between performers and audience members" (581). Evoking Judith Butler's distinction between performance (where one is being watched) and theatricality (where the act itself is the focus), he explores two case studies, one of which is Builders Association's *Continuous City* (2007): in this production a screen-covered machine holds centre stage, while actors evoke commentary from the audience by improvising advertisement/ consumerist based dialogues about the machine, about which the audience has to make their own meaning (584). The use of projection onto the screen and the intimate exchange evoked by it dispel "stable

distinctions between audience and performer” by turning the theatrical (use of story and characters) into performance.

*Spine* by Kevin Kerr is another recent example of intermediary performance that explores identity: the full-length play interrogates how people use virtual reality to embody alternate selves or avatars as a way to explore different bodily experiences. In the 2010 Realwheels/ University of Alberta production, interviews with characters were projected onto a screen arching over the stage and characters interacted with projected virtual reality environments. Another example of intermedia production is the 2008 Broadway revival of *Sunday in the Park with George*, which won the Drama Desk award for Outstanding Projection and Media design. Enormous blank surfaces and smaller movable screens were manipulated and moved around the stage as actors interacted with projected elements. As *shuffle* explores the cyborgian concept of biological and constructed realities existing together equally and co-dependently with no real difference between them, the idea of actually filming the Hipster Central segments and incorporating them into the play would make absolute sense. The integral role of the audience in meaning-making is clear in *shuffle* - scenes arranged out of order, juxtaposition of different storylines, and Kestrel and Char’s scenes interacting with audience members all demonstrate the frail line that separates fact from fiction and performers from audience. By trespassing the fourth wall, a perceived boundary that playwrights have been transgressing since before Shakespeare (asides for instance), the use of intermediary methods in a staged version of *shuffle* would be reflecting some of the novel’s main themes.

As the novel as a playlist where scenes are already out of order and upon replaying may exist in any number of orders, *shuffle* may also be interpreted as an open text. One way this could be reflected in a theatrical production would be if scenes were drawn out of a hat, either by the cyborg or an audience member, and played in that order (in the first half at least). “Introducing: *The Paramount*” also opens up dramatic possibilities for *shuffle*: the character list encourages improvisation and deviation from the text, saying that “actors may feel free to improvise when interacting with audience members” so long as it keeps within the story *shuffle* aims to tell. A production of *shuffle* could be influenced by experimental drama performances where multiple scenes are held in different parts of a house, sometimes concurrently, as following the example of the play *Tamara* by John Krizanc. An audience member may see the show many times, but may experience the story differently depending on how they move throughout the house and which characters they choose to follow (Pitz). This prismatic way of experiencing theatre confounds any simple explanation of linear storytelling - multiple perspectives create a sense of cyclical difference.

Visual art also has a key role to play in *shuffle*. From the fairly obvious use of the painting of the woman in “Summer 2010” to the visually rich painting experience between Alexandra and her father in “Fall 1993”, this novel is in part about Alexandra’s movement from observer to participant; references to fine art demonstrate her “growth” as an artist (ontologically, not chronologically) as she goes from observing art in the bar to participating in art - at least, in this arrangement of scenes. That the cyborg on the colony ship we hear about in the “Epilogue” is emulating Van Gogh’s art indicates

the lasting impression that art leaves on society and individual forms of expression: as aspects of Van Gogh's art miraculously mirror patterns of mathematical turbulence, so the art that Alex created with her life is part of something that continues after her.

## Memory

Barton also endorses the use of intermediary performance for its ability to represent memory as a neurological process: a memory is never the same twice as it "accumulates and sheds aspects, with all our experiences shaping and reshaping our understanding of past events" (594). Technology, Barton argues can help write the reordering of memory and its exploration through sound and visual stimuli which invites intimacy with the audience through intermediality (597). *shuffle* is largely structured around the use and re-ordering of memory, as mediated through technology, that being the iPod the cyborg is using to "listen" to the scenes in the novel. Although the scenes are "set" during the novel, Alex's re-entry into them with a new perspective opens up the possibility for change and re-creation through memory. Alex's movement from an observer to an active participant highlights this. As an "in-between place," intermediary performance may result in a loss of stability, but it allows for productive exchange between live and mediated performance "revealing identity, revealing presence, as performed, as a composite of embodied and mediated meaning" (600).

One of the epigraphs I've included at the start of the novel is from a Reddit Ask Me Anything (AMA) session with Margaret Atwood. Here is the quotation in context, responding to a question about the main character of *A Handmaid's Tale*:



...the central character Does have a sustaining faith, but the regime is Also using dogma in a heads-must-roll manner, and eliminating all the religious competition (as happened in the many wars in the 16th + 17th + 18th Cs, and as happened in the Bolshevik/Menshevik conflict in the early USSR, and in just about every dictatorship). The Epilogue: Well, things Have changed for the better.. just as at the end of 1984 there is an article on Newspeak written in standard English and in the past tense, so 1984 did not last. And Gilead did not last, which is a hopeful thing. However, people are evaluating that past in ways that we might find frivolous and wrongheaded, and they are using it for their own purposes. Which happens all the time... how DO we understand the past? What ARE its uses? Do we ever learn from it, or do we learn enough, or do we sometimes learn the wrong things?

Her idea that it is possible to learn the wrong things from memory connects to *shuffle*, which is largely focused on the constructed nature of the past. If the scenes are ordered and interpreted by a cyborg, how does that change how the reader responds to Alexandra? Would Alexandra have chosen different scenes from her past when negotiating her identity? What is cut out from her memory by her own “heads-must-roll” impulses? The cyborg is an observer: she can review the memories with less tendency to bend facts or fashion a memory to align with Alexandra’s ideas about herself; however, there is still an aspect of use here. The cyborg is using these scenes for her own purpose: as a way to entertain herself, as a way to gain a better understanding of human nature, to create art, to try and revisit her faded humanity, to build a sense of identity for herself - the reader is not given a definite answer. The doctor and captain in my last chapter are like the academics in Atwood’s epilogue, who argue over the legitimacy of the account the reader has just experienced as a first-person narrative: they give a greater sense of context to the story and at the same time complicate it.

In her work *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*, Alice Rayner writes that “[f]amily secrets, the secrets of heritage, secrets of the past, secrets of oneself ... compel their ghosts to appear, and the ghosts are impatient for the living to... release them into time” (xxxv). In order to negotiate an identity, characters take into consideration how they have been shaped vertically through heritage and horizontally through the influence of peers, social norms, and the media. Although there are no ghost figures readily apparent in *shuffle*, everyone becomes a ghost at the end, when it is revealed that a cyborg has been “viewing” Alexandra’s memories, fictions, and fears of the future. The cyborg herself is made a ghost at the end, as we learn that she has been dead for some time. All of these “ghosts” cycle through Alexandra’s story; some, like the cyborg, are waiting for the living to engage in their story, as the doctor eventually does in the “Epilogue.” Although we are “marked” by aspects of our past or relationships to family members, as well as our genetics and physical body, personal identity is negotiated in multiple social contexts and is communicated by what we embrace and what we discard.

Alexandra struggles with the spectre of social prejudice and sexual identity, uncertain about what she should reject or embrace. Her relationship with her gay father is a manifestation of the anxieties of rejection by her peers. Brian Miller, who wrote “Gay Fathers and Their Children” in the late 1970s pointed out that many “[r]eferences in the literature of homosexual fathers are limited to personal accounts” (544); although the representation of children with homosexual parents is becoming more prevalent in popular culture, by engaging with Alexandra’s notion of her identity in her troubled

relationship with her father, *shuffle* explores social realities surrounding gay parenting and family dynamics from a unique perspective. In “Fall 2000,” a young Alexandra is dealing with her parents’ recent divorce: she cannot figure out why her parents split, and therefore blames herself. Kids on the bus yell derogatory terms at each other, “fag” being the most prevalent. As this is the slur that stands out most to her in this flashback, Alexandra may suspect that her father is gay, but rejects this because of the negative social attitude towards homosexuality that she observes in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

We see her fraught relationship with her father play out in the first flashback scene, where Alexandra keeps herself distant from her dad and his partner, to the point where the reader feels alienated from the scene. Alexandra describes Johnny and Harold in a detached way, describing the way they look and act, rather than explaining them through her relationship to them. At this point, she knows that her father is gay, but doesn’t know how to connect with him; ultimately, however, she cares for him, staying behind to help him to the door. In “Fall 1993”, we see Alexandra interact with her father; as she is remembering her childhood (or the cyborg is viewing/ listening to it), the scene is narrated from a third person perspective, reflecting the distance between her adult self and child self. Is she even the same person? The language of her childhood resurfaces in “SCENE (((((((((.....)))))))))” when she and her dad meet in front of the Paramount:

ALEXANDRA  
What makes the sky blue?

“God paints it, sweetheart. Sometimes it’s blue,  
sometimes Payne’s grey, salmon, tangerine. Really look at it.”

ALEXANDRA  
(*looking up*)  
It’s uniformly grey.

Not only has their relationship changed since Alexandra’s childhood, but the environment in which they are interacting has also changed. Their differing perspectives of the sky allow for a polyphonic exchange that is depressing, but authentic.

Zali Gurevitch writes that “polyphony and [a] crucial position for the Other” are necessary to “making sense of the world and for self building” (243). A person cannot look only to herself and her past, but must consider and interact with the people around her, engage with various cultural contexts, and participate in interpreting those matrices of identity through dialogue. This working through of memory allows Alex “a rehearsal that itself stands as both traumatic symptom and potential cure, as acting out and working through, as repetition and repetition with a difference” (Snyder 486).

Technically, Alex is only alive in memory, in the iPod “scenes” that the cyborg saves: the playlist of her life will continue to loop, in a different order, bringing about new juxtapositions and new dialogues between genres.

### **Social disorder and the post-apocalyptic *Paramount***

Alexandra imagines her stage play, *The Paramount*, in a post-apocalyptic context: whether the script represents a work of fiction by Alexandra, manifesting her anxieties and displacing her dissatisfaction into another realm, or is the cyborg’s version

of the future drawing on people from Alexandra's life, *The Paramount* isn't a hopeful vision. In his artist statement, Jon Flieger writes that increased "[i]ntellectual focus on identity politics...has led to a fractured social structure, unable to create for itself any form of Utopian thinking or idealism" (126). Alexandra and the cyborg are unable to piece together a utopian fantasy. Instead, their search for an identity takes the grimy and violent route, as if this is the only way they can expect the world to end up. A utopia may let them down; a dystopia, at least, is predictable. One potential pitfall of the utopic vision is its exclusion of those who don't fit into the "ideal society"; the messy post-apocalyptic *Paramount* thread, on the other hand, is full of fringe and disenfranchised individuals. Which is preferable to Alexandra? The hipster's social justice and fair trade, excluding people who buy Starbucks and listen to mainstream music, or the dilapidated apartment building? Or is her favoured vision something in-between?

Flieger writes in his artist statement that "[a] book filled with the quietly different is increasingly relevant, as more and more social phobia impacts the ways in which many people interact with the world...the way...they are perceived and how their avoidance pushes them further outside of normative society" (7). In a way, *shuffle* is one of these books. The characters are "quietly different," living with quiet yet nagging dissatisfaction with some aspect of their personal lives. Amy, for example, rarely speaks, and is obviously socially anxious when she is placed in new situations or is introduced to new people. To Jay, a newcomer, Amy's behavior (slamming doors, for example) seems disruptive and rude. Alexandra and Amy do not speak to each other; instead, Alexandra

asks Garrett about her well-being while meeting at The Cure, and explains certain oddities in Amy's behaviour to Jay in "GAMES NIGHT". Amy is a passive observer at the protest, her wedding reception, and at the games night. We only get glimpses of her inner life, but for the most part, we are kept at arm's length. We hear from Garrett that she enjoys working with kids, but we never see this side of Amy's character. Amy is one example of the "quietly different", one of the people truly on the fringe, as opposed to the hipsters, who make a show of being different from mainstream culture. The people truly on the fringe of society are freer than those trying to conform, but living on the edge involves the strain of ambiguity and misinterpretation by others.

In her post-apocalyptic collection of poems titled *Ends of the Earth*, Jacqueline Turner explores the fate of our technological Consumerist advances. From the 9th poem:

...embrace the contradiction of wanting and knowing  
until they run together and all the iPods are piled high  
somewhere in Cache Creek or China rusting beautifully... (20).

The post-apocalyptic era in which Kestrel and Char live is the result of a major economic collapse. Without the support of industry and government, Detroit crumbles, with Windsor not far behind in atrophy. This contrasts Alexandra's concerns demonstrated through her ambiguous reaction to the Occupy protest. The 1 % are exploiting the rest of the world, but with the decay of America's free market economy, democracy and infrastructure alike recede into dust and misogynist values are reinstated, as demonstrated by Cam's treatment of Char in SCENE (((((((((.....))))))). The fallout of this economic apocalypse is frightening because of the underlying violence, hopelessness,

and further exploitation of women that results. Although “[o]ur awareness that...apocalyptic visions of human futurity mirror our own inner fears and desires does not mean that all trauma, whether individual or collective, will be consigned to the past... it does help us to confront our status as subjects of history by looking to the future” (Snyder 486). Alexandra’s post-apocalyptic play mirrors her anxieties about the breakdown of society, and becomes the landscape in which she encounters the trauma of Amy’s miscarriage and her parents’ divorce.

Amy’s miscarriage is an example of a personal apocalypse in *shuffle*. It upends the established order of Alexandra’s social identity, throwing her and her understanding of herself into chaos. The confusion of genre and the confusion of the characters in SCENE (((((((((.....))))))) results from this personal apocalypse. The cyborg also experiences an apocalyptic upheaval: a power surge inserts her consciousness into the Landlady, and causes irreversible damage to her life-support system. The spreading blue is meant to represent the breakdown of file information as her cybernetic self begins to shut down. For all of these reasons, it is fitting that act three should play out on the post-apocalyptic porch of The Paramount.

Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy influenced my vision of the post-apocalyptic atmosphere of *The Paramount*. As in her narrative, *shuffle* “emphasizes the futility of attempting to quarantine an individual's subjective interiority from relations among historical subjects... the familial, the corporate, the national, the global, the non-human and the post-human” (Snyder 473). Each scene in the novel tracks Alexandra’s movement from observer to participant, marking the influence of her family dynamic in

the prose chapters, exploring the effects of Christian and Hipster subcultures in the screenplay, and contrasting that with her active and violent tendencies manifested as her alter ego, Kestrel. The post-human element is the cyborg herself, who is interpreting scenes in the playlist.

This interpretation of Alexandra's life by the cyborg affects their interaction in SCENE (((((((.....)))))). Pattie Belle Hastings's art project "The Cyborg Mommy. User's Manual" explores the relationship between mother and child monitored and directed by technology and extended through stoves and other appliances that women were expected to use from the 1950s onwards. Biologically, the mother usually acts as an incubator and carrier for unborn child, making her a kind of machine (79). The cyborg in *shuffle* is a mother figure, who negotiates her relationship with Alexandra through technology. The iPod allows the cyborg to "save" Alexandra's memories, and in the end, it is the matriarchal cyborg who ushers Alex into the womb-like EMPTY ROOM, where Alex can start the process of negotiating her memories and identity with a better outlook.

### **Troubling binaries**

"The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion," Donna Haraway claims in her "Cyborg Manifesto." Alexandra's *Paramount* explores this coexistence of science fiction and society, where anxieties about the collapse of a free market and democratic system are set in the near future and reveal potential problems brewing in the North American economy. We see the effects of Capitalism gone wrong



on cities such as Detroit, which collapses because of its dependence on a single industry. This fluidity between fact and fiction is explored in “SCENE (((((((.....))))))”, where Alex and Zee discuss their relationship in a hospital hallway while standing in front of the Paramount. The boundary between Alexandra’s fiction and her social reality is thin: both overlap and interact with each other.

The boundary between Detroit and Windsor could also be a site of troubling binaries between physical spaces or bodies. Kestrel tries to hold onto the radio announcer’s idea that her side of the river is the better off of the two; Cameron and Char don’t believe this to be true, however, and try to cross this boundary in order to make a new start. They are not able to cross it because the border between has been closed arbitrarily. Who closed the border and why? Does society close borders to us that we would otherwise desire to cross? Kestrel has created a binary in order to feel content with where she is in life: I’m in Windsor, she may think, but at least it’s not as bad as Detroit. In this way, *shuffle* could be discussed through a feminist lens, with Kestrel as an unknowing adherent to a binary-based worldview that ultimately oppresses her and her sister. In order to escape from this system, Kestrel has to be shown that the problem is not economic, not even societal - after she rubs Garrett’s face in the rat skin, she runs away, realizing that the real problem is not her economic situation, but rather it is her approach to the people around her.

Troublings of traditional understandings of gender and sexuality are present in *shuffle*. Characters explore the boundary between men and women and gay and straight, negotiating through societal pressures, choice, and body performance. Zee, for

example, has not always considered herself gay. Alexandra mentions that the last time they spoke about Zee's sexuality, Zee considered herself bisexual; Zee rejects Jay as a potential partner, however, and confronts Alexandra with her feelings for her. Zee's identification goes through a period of questioning before she comes to understand her desires. Identity is not attained fully formed: there are journeys of discovery, the influence of others, biological factors, and the effect of societal values to be considered and negotiated. Harold also did not always identify as gay: he married Alexandra's mother and had two children with her. The fluidity between gay and straight, including the spectrum of bisexuality and asexuality amongst other self-identifiers, flies in the face of the traditionally set heteronormative, male/female identity binary that dominates Western culture.

Alexandra struggles with the Western binary, avoiding engagement with potential romantic or sexual partners: in "Summer 2013", she makes no move to speak to the man with the wise nose who so intrigues her. She also tries to pass Jay's attentions to Zee, despite her connection with him at The Cure. Zee accuses her of being afraid of complication in "SCENE (((((((((.....)))))))))", but complication, of gender roles at least, seems to be what Alexandra actually desires. Her alter-ego, Kestrel, has a shaved head and engages in violence, taking on the role of a street-hardened gang member, a character usually imagined as male. As Alexandra moves from observer to participant, she grows into Alex, a character with traits from the various manifestations of her past and imagined selves, from her childhood self lost in the woods to Alexandra offering comfort to Jay on the porch of the Paramount. Although Alexandra's sexuality is not

completely defined in the novel, she troubles the boundary between male and female gender roles through her social interactions and fictions.

### **The cyborg herself**

LeiLani Nishime discusses the figure of the cyborg through science fiction films such as the 1982 dystopian film, *Blade Runner*. As she states in “The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future,” the “narrative power [of the cyborg] comes from its ability to blur boundaries by blending the Other and the human” (35). In *Blade Runner*, the difference between humans and the cyborg replicants has become so miniscule it is difficult to tell who is organically human and who is not. This narrative is complicated by the main character’s ambiguous nature: is he a replicant or not? This is even further troubled by replicant Roy’s belief that he has a soul. All of this addresses the question of what it means to be human, and if the division between the organic and the mechanical is as definite as we tend to make it out to be. Haraway establishes the cyborg as a border figure, confounding the boundary between the organic and the mechanical (Gandy 44). In “The Persistence of Complexity: Re-reading Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto,” Matthew Gandy highlights Haraway’s “issue with essentialist, anti-technological and anti-modern strands of feminist thought” and her use of the cyborg as a metaphor for human subjectivity (43). Ronald Kline furthers this idea in his article “Where are the Cyborgs in Cybernetics,” saying that by breaking barriers between organic and mechanical (to transmit information), the “cyborg can then disrupt old notions about human autonomy” (335). Although the story of Alexandra’s life is based

on human experience, the cyborg who is “listening” to the playlist is the one interpreting the scenes and organizing them through a “shuffle” function on a media device. This intervention of technology into human experience in order to create meaning also challenges the tendency of cyborg fiction “despite...acknowledgement of the hazy boundary between man and machine...to recenter humans as the exclusive producers of meaning” (Nishime 37). In the “Epilogue,” the ability to produce meaning does in fact cycle back to the human sphere, as the doctor takes the media device and the cyborg’s memory hard drive in order to reconstruct her experience. This highlights the interplay between technology and humanity, how it is not so much one commenting on the other, but that there is a mutual building of understanding developed with the input and assistance of both - another demonstration of the fluidity between the organic and the constructed. The cyborg, as a metaphor for this interdependence “subvert[s] the dream of purity and offer[s] instead a future of mutual contamination” where human and constructed exist together as one being (Nishime 34).

While discussing performance art that incorporates technology, Garoian and Gaudelius claim that “interplay between the actual and the virtual commences as the body abandons awareness of its corporeal reality by being aesthetically absorbed in cyberspace” (343). This explains the cyborg’s presence in the character of the Landlady: due to a power surge, the cyborg’s consciousness fuses with a virtual reality (for her) where characters from the previous scenes also find themselves. The Landlady, whose title combines a mineral term and the designation for a human woman, is the proprietor of an apartment building, where individual rooms could stand for individual memory

files on the cyborg's hard drive. She also doesn't have a "human" name, only a title, which is all the cyborg is called by the humans in the "Epilogue." The parallels between the Landlady and the cyborg allow the reader to view the cyborg as a human subject before the nature of her physical body is revealed.

The Landlady/ cyborg also moves from an observer to a participant in Alexandra's story. Upon discovering that she is dying, the cyborg says "may as well watch while I can." Once the key to the EMPTY ROOM is restored to her, however, she manages to lead all of the characters safely inside, to be "saved" as memory files, so that Alexandra can continue to negotiate her past in order to embrace a new understanding of who she is. The cyborg is the foundational figure in *shuffle*. The novel is presented to us through her consciousness, along with the aid of a media device: we are able to view the scenes along with her internal data processor, trying to make meaning from the random juxtaposition of scenes on her playlist. By entering the narrative, the cyborg moves from a distant observer to an active participant in Alex's post-apocalyptic dialogue with her past and the people who have most influenced her. Whether the cyborg collected these memories from documents or footage or a futuristic brain bank, or the memories are her own from a distant biological past, the interplay between the human experience and technology questions the boundary between fact and fiction, human and constructed, the past and the present.

## **The end**

*shuffle* is an example of the narrative potential of the novel. The interplay of stylistic genres allows for storytelling that involves aspects of performance and audience interaction, presenting scenes in a way that demands the reader take an active role in meaning making. Like the cyborg, and the doctor afterwards, the reader must consider the scenes and how they relate to each other, interpreting Alexandra's multiple manifestations. The three act style, as well as the inclusion of art and musical touch points, provides stability in an otherwise fluid world, where boundaries we tend to take for granted, from physical space to sexuality, are troubled and re-negotiated.

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